

The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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David Bergman won the George Elliston Poetry Prize for *Cracking the Code* (Ohio State Univ. Press).

Patricia Clark has just completed a Ph.D. in English at the University of Houston.

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Joseph Epstein's new collection of essays, *Once More Around the Block*, will be published by Norton in the spring.

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Florence Grossman's poetry has appeared in *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry*, and *The Nation*.

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David Paul reviewed Maynard Mack's *Alexander Pope: A Life* for the May issue of *The New Criterion*.

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James W. Tuttleton reviewed Irving Howe's *The American Newness* for the April issue of *The New Criterion*.

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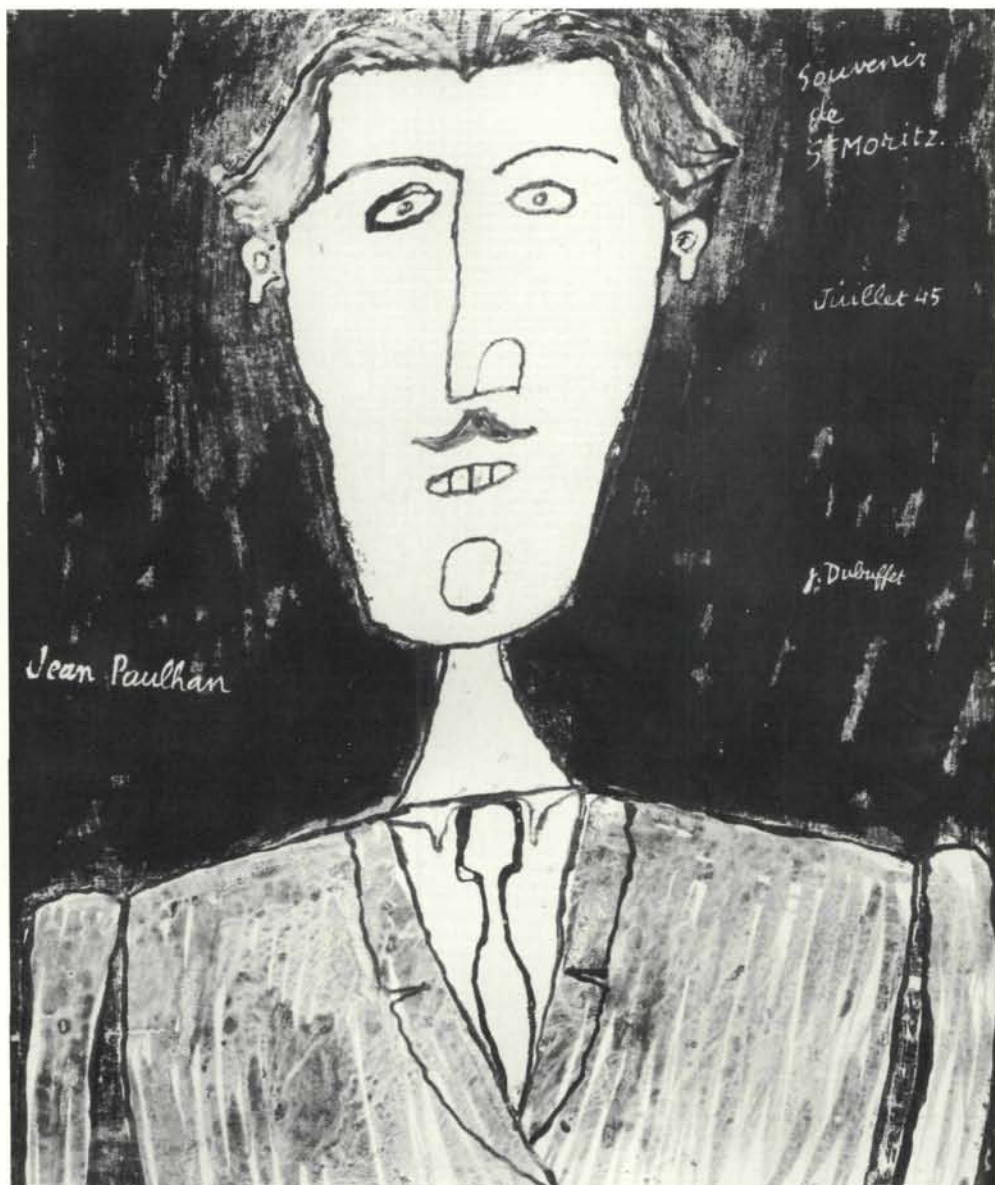


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Rewriting the history of American literature

by James W. Tuttleton

That historians should give their own country a break, I grant you; but not so as to state things contrary to fact . . . Readers should be very attentive to and critical of historians, and they in turn should be constantly on their guard.

—Polybius, *History* (Book XVI)

The writing of our literary history is in serious trouble. Partly this is a consequence of the uncertain status of the discipline of history itself, where arguments proliferate about whether the writing of history is a social science on an empirical base or a branch of the narrative art. But partly the crisis reflects the impact of recent theories of writing itself which call into question the very capacity of historical prose to tell the truth about what happened in the past. Some, like Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight*, claim that “considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint.” And others, like Geoffrey Hartman in *Beyond Formalism*, complain that “We are all disenchanted with those picaresque adventures in pseudo-causality which go under the name of literary history, those handbooks with footnotes which claim to sing of the whole but load every rift with glue.” For others, after the manner of Henry Adams, a presentation of the sequence of events seems to be as much as anyone can claim as possible: forget about cause-effect connections altogether. Finally, many have complained at the corruption of literary history by authorial prejudice.

Can historians comprehensively survey the literary evidence, weigh it judiciously, organize and describe it fairly, and reach disinterested historical judgments? V.L. Parrington, in the Foreword to *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), answered in the negative: “. . . very likely in my search I have found what I went forth to find, as others have discovered what they were seeking.” It is no wonder, then, that the present status of historical writing is problematic and that one looks in vain for an adequate history of our letters. Perhaps this situation can be clarified by some consideration of (1) how our literary histories have been composed in the recent past, of (2) what principles seem now to be operative—especially as exemplified in a work of literary history by Lawrence Buell, entitled *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance*¹—and of (3) what the immediate future of our literary history may be.

I

The *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917-1921)—edited by William P. Trent, John Erskine, Stuart P. Sherman, and Carl Van Doren—surpassed all of its predecessors as a result of its special features.

1 *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance*, by Lawrence Buell; Cambridge University Press, 513 pages, \$34.50.

These included greater size (it ran to three thick volumes), a diversity of authorship (it was the collaborative venture of fifty-six writers), an extensive bibliography, and rather full coverage of a wide range of non-belletristic writings. Trent and his associates cited with pleasure those who had earlier labored in the field of American literary history: William Bradford in *History of Plimmoth Plantation*, Cotton Mather in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), Samuel L. Knapp in *Lectures on American Literature* (1829), Rufus Wilmot Griswold in *Prose Writers of America* (1847), Evert A. and George L. Duyckinck in *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1855), Moses Coit Tyler in *History of American Literature During the Colonial Time 1607-1765* (1878), Charles F. Richardson in *American Literature, 1607-1885* (1886-1888), and Barrett Wendell in *A Literary History of America* (1900). But they noted with some justice that previous literary histories had been too anglophile, too jingoistic, or too belletristic. The *Cambridge History of American Literature* was to be a work of modern scholarship free of such deficiencies.

There was much substance to the editors' claims. In addition to their own essays, the *Cambridge History* includes excellent work by such luminaries (then, if not now) as V. L. Parrington, Paul Elmer More, William Ellery Leonard, Henry Cabot Lodge, Norman Foerster, Joseph Warren Beach, and Morris R. Cohen. If the entire work will not serve today, that is because there is a distinctive anti-aesthetic bias in it. While the editors knew of the dangers of unbridled nationalism and knew that, at the highest level, literature has no national boundaries, they shaped an account of our writing that clearly subordinated literary values to intellectual history. They complained that "to write the intellectual history of America from the modern aesthetic standpoint is to miss precisely what makes it significant among modern literatures, namely, that for two centuries the main energy of Americans went into exploration, settlement, labour for subsistence, religion, and statecraft." This was

indeed to admit that early Americans "found themselves obliged to dispense for the most part with art for art," but the editors claimed for themselves "a taste and judgment unperverted by the current finical and transitory definition of literature," by which they meant the definition formulated in the aesthetic movement which had developed, from the 1880s onward, in reaction to Victorian English and American moralizing in literature.

Had they been less averse to the art-for-art's-sake movement, the editors of the *Cambridge History* might have provided a more distinctively *literary* history, a record of the response of writers to their predecessors. But they preferred, in large part, to establish the nonliterary context in which our works of the imagination had arisen. Trent and his colleagues remarked that a full acquaintance with the written record of two centuries of American *thought*, in all fields bordering on letters, would "enlarge the spirit of American literary criticism and render it more energetic and masculine." It is not clear whether the four women who collaborated in this venture—Elizabeth Cook, Mary Austin, Louise Pound, and Ruth Putnam—would have agreed with the bully language of this last observation, which echoes the outdoorsy macho tone of the Teddy Roosevelt era. But it is manifest that the intellectual power of the *Cambridge History*, like that of Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, had the effect of reducing the study of literature to the study of literary history and to the history of ideas. It is not surprising, therefore, that the New Criticism arose in reaction to this reduction and asserted the relative autonomy and independence of literary objects from the vicissitudes of history.

Emerson had argued in "The American Scholar" that each age "must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this." The literary history that addressed itself to the post-World War II generation was entitled simply *Literary History of the United States* (1948). Like the

Cambridge History, it was a collaborative venture. Edited by Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby, the *Literary History of the United States* observed that, by the middle of the twentieth century, the United States had “produced too much literature for any one man to read and digest.” For that reason our literary history could be “best written by a group of collaborators, whatever the risk of differences of opinion.” Aided by Howard Mumford Jones, Dixon Wecter, and Stanley T. Williams, who were listed as “associates,” the editors assembled a full team of fifty-five writers, divided up the work, and produced the text in five years. That only one woman was invited to contribute to the project—Adrienne Koch, who wrote on “Philosopher-Statesmen of the Republic”—may have helped to minimize differences of opinion, although it is fair to remark that there were fewer women scholars in the Forties than now, not to speak of fewer feminist ideologues.

Minimizing disagreement seems to have been high on the Spiller agenda, for the *Literary History* had a distinctive thesis to propound, a new vision of American literature to present—one which Trent and his *Cambridge History* colleagues could not have predicted because they could not have foreseen what America would become between 1917 and 1948. Writing “a history of literature within the margins of art but crossing them to follow our writers into the actualities of American life,” Spiller and his colleagues gave substantial attention to politics, theology, publishing history, oratory, immigration, folklore, bibliography, business practices, etc. These forays into the contextual backgrounds of American literature permitted the material, according to Spiller, to be grasped in its “logical pattern” as an “organic” expression of the national experience. This national experience, he argued, unfolded in two phases—the first, one of colonial settlement and the establishment of an Eastern culture, ending about the time of the Civil War; the second, one of Western frontier settlement and the consolidation of

the nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific, ending certainly by the time of the outbreak of World War I. The modern era of achieved “national fulfillment”—the period after World War I—Spiller saw as marked by the attainment of American power and leadership among the nations of the world. In literature, this meant that our writing had passed beyond colonial dependency and provincial Victorian mediocrity and could now boast, rightfully, of modern masterworks equaling those of any other nation in any previous era.

Spiller and his colleagues, it is worth remembering, came to their majority in the Twenties and Thirties, when professors of American literature often suffered humiliation at the hands of their anglophile colleagues in English departments, some of whom believed that America had no refined literature comparable to that produced in England. The burst of American literary scholarship on which the *Literary History* was based, and of which it is the supreme example, was in large part intended to claim for American literature a stature comparable to its position as a military and economic power in the postwar world.

In Spiller’s view, the two historical cycles that had produced America’s rise to pre-eminence were marked by “two great movements in our literary history: the era of Emerson, Melville, and Whitman; and the age in which we are living today [1948]. The first epoch is evidently the climax of a long growth from colonial beginnings to a self-conscious and organized nation, but a nation on the brink of a destructive Civil War and a westward expansion transforming its character. The other, the era of complete national fulfillment, shows its beginnings in the earliest hints of a country that was to be continental in scope and cosmopolitan in population, but that would not realize itself completely and make its voice heard and its power felt in the world at large until the twentieth century.”

Most readers will probably assent to the importance of the literature of the era of Emerson, Melville, and Whitman—what

F. O. Matthiessen improperly called the "American Renaissance." This is in part the period that Lawrence Buell covers in *New England Literary Culture*, to which I shall turn in a moment. What is immediately of interest, it seems to me, is what Spiller has to say about the second "great movement" in our literary history, by virtue of which American literature attained world eminence. But here we must turn to another book by Robert Spiller, to *The Cycle of American Literature* (1955), an historical survey that he wrote by himself after he had finished editing the *Literary History of the United States*. Our modern pre-eminence, he writes in that book, "began when the United States was about to move as a single people into a distant world war [1917]. Then, as Van Wyck Brooks clearly saw, the 'pulpy quick' of American life, the 'nervous and self-critical vitality,' was again 'in a strange ferment.' The philosophy of naturalism, which science had nurtured, could now become the central drive of a literary movement which had begun in the nineties, had been stalled for more than a decade by the forces of convention and reaction, and now had broken out into the open."

Spiller's historicism probably accounts for avoidance of the term "modernism." Instead, much too narrowly, he found "naturalism" to be the key to the triumph of modern American literature. Seeking that determinism which would explain American literature "both in general scheme and in detail," Spiller reached some conclusions in *The Cycle of American Literature* that, in retrospect, look very curious indeed. Certain major writers, like Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound, apparently didn't exhibit sufficient traits of naturalism and were slighted. Those who did reflect "the philosophy of naturalism"—Dreiser, Frost, O'Neill, and Hemingway—were offered as the chief exhibits of our supremacy in the literary field. Now, these are arguably major writers, but if naturalism equals a philosophy of determinism, the claim is made in the face of several inconvenient facts: Dreiser's mystical strain, which erupts full-blown at the end of his career;

Frost's unrelenting emphasis on individualism and the moral will; and Hemingway's existential characterizations of human freedom. Spiller treated T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner as virtual post-World War II "reactions" to the "triumph of naturalism," even though both began their careers about the time of World War I. Eliot was called by Spiller "the dominant figure" of a reactionary movement "toward standards, forms, restraints." And Faulkner was seen as a spokesman for the past, for tradition, and for aesthetic standards which Spiller linked to a conservative reaction to the Twenties and Thirties—although he conceded that "it is not so easy to define the classical element in Faulkner's work as it is in Eliot's."

Such views, which have persisted in all later editions of both the *Cycle* and the *Literary History of the United States*, had the decisive effect of elevating, temporarily, the reputation of the writers Spiller and his colleagues celebrated. But with the passage of time, the currency of the naturalists has been steadily devalued, largely because theories of determinism have come to seem inadequately grounded. They are therefore incapable of suppressing the conviction that freedom of will and freedom of action are realities. As the philosophy of naturalistic determinism fades into the past, we are left merely with the literary art of these writers; and from that perspective, Dreiser and O'Neill seem now much less interesting and important than Faulkner and Eliot. Spiller's work is thus a commentary on the dangers of trying to shape the canon prematurely and on the basis of the ideas a literary work may be said to reflect.

II

Partly in reaction to the bankrupt older historical determinism of the Parrington-Spiller generation, we have witnessed in the last two decades an explosion of critical theory which has produced semiotic, structuralist, deconstructionist, phenomenological, black aesthetic, and reader-response criticism, as

well as newer versions of Freudianism and Marxism. In addition, feminism has produced a large body of criticism aimed at exposing the “repression” of women’s writing by the “patriarchal critical establishment.” These developments now dominate much of our literary discourse. How have they affected contemporary writing of “American” or “United States” “literary” “history”? (All of these quotation marks are meant to imply some significant re-thinking of conventional definitions.) How have they had a bearing, for example, on the writing of a work like Lawrence Buell’s *New England Literary Culture*?

First, “literary” itself, as a term denoting a special mode of verbal discourse, has, for those intellectuals influenced by Continental criticism, become useless, since all literature is said to dissolve into mere *écriture*. For the avant-garde theorist nowadays, there are simply “texts”—dime novels, comic books, *The Waste Land*—all, apparently, of equivalent critical interest. This argument has perhaps affected literary historians slightly less than others, for they rarely restricted themselves to the study of belles lettres, claiming at least some literary importance for sermons, political tracts, histories, etc. What is new in all of this is that texts formerly regarded as having a marginal claim to critical attention have now been provided with a “theoretical justification.”

With the loss of a clear definition of “literature,” the idea of “genres” has also gone down the drain. Hence, texts of a hybrid character, which previously could not be formally organized into our aesthetic frameworks, are now grist for the critical mill and fair game for the schoolroom anthologizers. Moreover, “history,” in the older sense of a narrative art transcribing “what really happened,” has been largely abandoned in favor of cliometric tabulation. With numbers and statistics, it seems, historians can hope to escape accusations of ideological bias and authorial subjectivism. Finally, neither “American” nor “United States” satisfies everyone as an adjective properly applicable to the literary history of

this country. For no history can appropriate the term “American” without offending certain jealous nationals throughout the rest of this hemisphere who contest the “cultural imperialism” we are said to impose. And the term “United States” can logically refer only to the literature produced here since the founding of the Republic. Trent and Spiller and their colleagues saw no problem with either term, and often used the former as a synonym for the latter. That no one was really confused by these usages seems not to bother radical historians who argue that the terms have been too casually employed in previous literary histories.

It becomes a matter of some interest, then, to see how some of these problems are addressed in Lawrence Buell’s new literary history, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance*. In some ways I think Buell would have liked to write an old-fashioned literary history. Some major topics of the book include the poetic theories of Emerson and Dickinson; the centrality of oratory and preaching in the era; “literary scripturism” as an unrecognized genre of the period; and the reinvention of Puritanism in selected works of the period. A final section of the book deals with the centrality of landscape in New England writing, with the icon of the New England village, and with comic grotesque and provincial gothic styles.

Emerson had observed in his *Journals* that “we do what we can, & then make a theory to prove our performance the best.” There was some sanity in this older approach, since it freed the writer to go about his business and then later to defend it, if necessary, by recourse to a theory. But recent critical palaver has made it impossible for Buell to *assume* the propriety of a traditional literary historian’s approach to these materials. The diversity of so many critical approaches obliges him to advert to them in a first chapter that analyzes the possible ways to record the literary history of the period under review. As a demonstration of his own self-consciousness, Buell’s opening chapter is perhaps intended to satisfy Umberto Eco’s

call for research based only on an announced theory which, as he puts it in *A Theory of Semiotics*, has “the courage to specify its own contradictions” and to make them obvious “where they are not apparent.” (Candor of this kind ought to make the historian commendably open and direct, but the self-consciousness required by Eco’s position can just as well lead to neurotic paralysis.) In any case, Buell labors under the mandate to announce his theory and then to deconstruct it. In the process of doing so, he gives something to very nearly every current school of criticism and then takes it away. The result is an adroit demonstration that he has done his homework but that he is not committed to any of the critical “monisms” that are currently commended with such zeal. How he achieves this goal is worth noting.

Clearly Buell is self-conscious about seeing “New England” as a coherent entity, but he believes that the literature of the six north-eastern states can be isolated as the object of historical inquiry. (He embraces the New Yorkers Cooper and Melville as adopted sons). Whatever Continental criticism may say, he is also inclined to accept the privileging of “literature.” But the belletristic thinness of his period obliges him, like Trent and Spiller, to find ways to loosen the definition of literature so as to accommodate a discussion of lyceum speeches, sermons, travel writing, historical prose, and odd texts that other historians haven’t known what to do with.

What about the claim that conventional history falsifies data by transforming it into a story? Insofar as Buell’s work “narrativizes” its material, it tells the story of the development of New England literature from “an amateur pastime to its peak of distinction, the so-called New England Renaissance of about 1830-1860.” But in *New England Literary Culture* this story—like that of *Moby-Dick*, with its freight of cetological information—is so broken up by not really irrelevant data that the reader will have to “constitute the story” for himself. By this means Buell largely escapes the charge of “fictionalizing” his material. What about the

problem of periodization, about which historians are constantly fretting? Buell is willing to accept military-political events as watershed historical experiences affecting literature (for example, the “period” from the American Revolution to the Civil War, as his subtitle imperfectly suggests). But Buell believes that these boundaries are less important than the elements of the writing itself. And, since Buell confesses himself to be a man who by training and temperament is inclined to see the content of this literature as a reflection of spiritual, religious, and moral issues, he emphasizes these themes. Bravo! The literature does principally commend itself to us in these terms.

Marxists, of course, will not be happy with the importance given to “spiritual” themes; they will want a materialist interpretation of the historical period in question. Buell forestalls Marxist criticism by announcing that “any mature conception of the structure of literary history must draw not simply on formalist and empiricist scholarship but also on Marxist investigations,” because Marxism has “generated the closest approximations to date of a satisfactory model to replace the unselfconscious names-dates-movements-trends approach of old-style impressionist historicism.” With a nod to Raymond Williams, Pierre Macherey, Georg Lukács, and Frederic [sic] Jameson, Buell gives us an obligatory chapter on the economic sociology of the antebellum literary marketplace, or on the ways that writers made their money. (“Emerson could not have become a prophet of cosmic optimism unless the role had paid well enough,” etc.) Nevertheless, Buell is no historical determinist. He doesn’t appear to believe much in history as the Absent Cause, and grants his authors the freedom they claimed to affect the course of history.

If the old-style impressionist historicism is passé, how can modern literary historians assess the literary quality of the writers they discuss? What kind of objective data will support evaluations of literary merit? Can the cliometricians be satisfied that Emily Dickinson is a major artist? Buell provides

us with a long appendix offering "Vital Statistics: A Quantitative Analysis of Authorship as a Profession in New England." Here some 276 literary figures are analyzed in terms of parentage, state of residence, race, gender, education, politics, religion, profession, socioeconomic status, etc. Trends are noted, norms derived; facts are faithfully recorded; and lists and charts festoon the appendix. The sheer bulk of the statistics encourages us to feel that we are approaching the objective truths of science.

But how does Buell respond to the feminist call for restoring to the canon women writers who were allegedly repressed by the patriarchy of the nineteenth century? According to Buell's five "objective criteria" for the profession of authorship, we learn that, of these 276 writers, sixty-seven were women. Of these 276 men and women writers, thirty-five may be designated as "major." Major writers are defined as those who "either have been assigned an individual bibliography in the *Literary History of the United States* [1948] or have been the subject of an article or book in at least five of the annual Modern Language Association bibliographies from 1970 to 1982." This criterion is designed "to factor in the judgments of traditional and recent scholarship"; the latter clearly means recent feminist criticism.

Of these thirty-five major writers—including Bancroft, Bryant, Dwight, Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, Longfellow, Lowell, Motley, Parkman, Prescott, Thoreau, Tyler, and Whittier—only six are women; and four of these lived toward the end of the period, when authorship as a profession for women is said to have been easier. These six major women writers are Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mercy Otis Warren, and Phyllis Wheatley.

This list of "major" writers (men as well as women), derived through objective criteria, immediately presents certain problems in relation to the canon of American literature. (It is not properly founded on the swollen, overstuffed MLA bibliography, which is largely the product of publish-or-

perish desperation.) Let's take the women writers for the sake of discussion. Are these six women really authors to whom we frequently return for their capacity to give *aesthetic* pleasure? In my judgment only Dickinson is such a writer. I suspect that if the others are read at all nowadays, the reading is required in a college course which is obliged to offer "historical coverage" or which has an axe to grind. How many of these women have you reread recently simply for the joy of experiencing the art of language? How many of the major men writers?

But the complaint against Buell's list of major writers is more likely to go the other way. Devoted feminists will doubtless complain that the list is still too skewed toward male writers and that a place has to be made for more women as "major"—perhaps Delia Bacon, Sarah Knowles Bolton, or Maria Gowen Brooks (all, by the way, acclaimed in *American Women Writers* or *Notable American Women*). After all, the argument goes, the canon of American literature cannot be appropriately revamped along feminist lines unless more women are recognized as major.

Buell, however, is already ahead of the game and appears properly sympathetic. According to his objective criteria, Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard (1823-1902) doesn't make the grade as major, although she is, in his view, one of the most important writers of the period: "Stoddard today is absurdly undervalued. Those who trouble to read her are in for the treat of finding a genuinely first-rate talent as yet virtually undiscovered, for whose best work absolutely no apology is needed to place it alongside that of Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe." Those who are familiar with Stoddard's work—for example, *The Morgesons* (1862), *Two Men* (1865), and *Temple House* (1867)—may be surprised by this judgment into a meditation on the occasional eccentricities of taste in a seasoned reader. But there is no question that we will now have less trouble in reading Stoddard, for the dust jacket tells us that Professor Buell and Sandra A. Zagarell have

just edited Stoddard's *The Morgesons and Other Writings*.

One may wish that Buell's history had more methodological coherence, that it had told, for example, a whole story of the period, or that it had recounted the literary events of even a single writer's career. One may wish that he had risen above the confessions of self-consciousness and followed his own natural bent, leaving it to us to abstract from the book his theoretical premises and to locate for ourselves his contradictions, if any. In the final analysis, however, we must be grateful to him, for he has given us a solid historical analysis of the "literary culture," marked by some acutely intelligent literary criticism. And the several frameworks he proposes—the quantitative, economic, sociological, political, religious—are helpful. They rightly serve the historian's purpose in formulating the general context out of which the truly major writers (as opposed to "talents") have emerged.

III

Buell's *New England Literary Culture* is a work standing midway, as I see it, between the methods of the older traditional literary histories and the newer work of radical revisionist history, much of which is marked by a left-wing slant and informed by the recent critical theories I have mentioned. Hence, I cannot conclude without some discussion of a forthcoming project which will apparently subject American literary history to the full assault of the revisionist historians.

This project is a five-volume literary history to be published in 1989 by Cambridge University Press under the general editorship of Professor Sacvan Bercovitch of Harvard University. What makes this history worth anticipating is its prospectus, recently published in *American Literature*: "America as Canon and Context: Literary History in a Time of Dissensus." The Bercovitch project will be novel in that he has commissioned some twenty-two "Americanists trained in the 'sixties and early 'seventies" so that the

experience of this generation may receive "its distinctive form of expression." Bercovitch leaves no doubt as to what he perceives to be the experience of this generation—"discontinuity, disruption, dissensus." The new project, as he describes it in the prospectus, will eschew the "hubris" of the single-authored literary history (won't the shades of Tyler and Parrington bristle at that?) and reject the "consensus ideal" and "anonymity" of the *Literary History of the United States*. (It is worth observing that the *Literary History* lists the names of all contributors opposite the title page and each writer's contribution is designated by chapter title toward the end of the volume; it is not therefore an anonymous production.)

If the aims of the Bercovitch prospectus are realized, we may anticipate a literary history in the "dialogic mode," as Bakhtin called it, with a central emphasis on unmasking the "ideologies" and "myths" by which Americans have organized their lives and recorded their history, literary and otherwise. One such ideology to be unmasked is "the American Way," which I take to have been celebrated by the *Cambridge History* and the *Literary History*. Our new Cambridge authors are apparently going to demystify patriotism by advancing a perspective that "denies both the disjunction of politics from art and the transcendent claims of the American Way." This perspective, according to Bercovitch, "sees the ideal America, as well as the actual America, in relativistic, historical terms, as expressing a certain way of life. It reminds us (what some of our best writers sometimes make us forget) that individualism, self-reliance, and liberal democracy are no more or less absolute, nor more or less true to the laws of nature and the mind, than the once-eternal truths of providence, hierarchy, and the divine right of kings." Bercovitch *et al.* seem to be setting an agenda, in opposition to "some of our best writers," for an assault on a number of personal, social, and political values which the American people, on the whole, have cherished, lived for, and at times died for. Can this be?

The prospectus is clear that, for Bercovitch and his young colleagues, the values of individualism, self-reliance, and liberal democracy are merely part of "the inescapable fictionality of our contextual structures—social, scientific, historical." They are elements of an ideology that have coalesced into a "myth," the American Myth, which he calls a set of "culturally prescribed directives for thought and action" which have worked, but worked only by deception, "by translating the historical into the universal: a particular kind of man into mankind; a particular race or class into a moral abstraction; a particular set of values into a metaphysics of the Good." As Bercovitch *et al.* see it, Spiller and his colleagues swallowed almost whole the hidden ideology of the American Myth. If they did criticize it, it was only an "intrinsic" criticism; they appreciated it "from within." Bercovitch and company, however, will try to unmask the American Way, to "see through it, to expose its historical functions, necessarily from an extrinsic, and often from a hostile perspective." The new literary history, then, will apparently play the myth of the American Way off the ideology of the counterculture's dissent.

The notion that I must have misunderstood this prospectus has led me to look up two new books by Bercovitch that promise to throw light on the intention of the new Cambridge history: *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986), edited by Bercovitch for the Harvard University Press; and *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986), edited by Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen for Cambridge.² A perusal of them has not convinced me that my dismay was groundless.

The first volume is a collection of essays by some of these young Americanists whose experience has been that of discontinuity, disruption, and dissensus. Here is a sample of the Table of Contents: "We Hold These

Truths': Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founders," by Robert A. Ferguson; "The American Sexual Politics of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson," by Sandra M. Gilbert; "Corporate Fiction: Norris, Royce, and Arthur Machen," by Walter Benn Michaels; and "Collage or Miracle: Historicism in a Deconstructed World," by Wendy Steiner. The essays, diverse in subject and varying in quality, will not, I am happy to report, effect that reconstruction of American literary history called for by Bercovitch. Although he claims in the Preface that all the contributors share "similar convictions about the *problematics* of literary history," I find that this cannot be inferred from the essays alone. In any case, Bercovitch specifies what are *for him* these problematics:

that race, class, and gender are formal principles of art and therefore integral to textual analysis; that language has the capacity to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structures it seems to reflect; that political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation; that aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past; that the task of literary historians is not just to show how art transcends culture, but also to identify and explore the ideological limits of their time, and then to bring these to bear upon literary analysis in such a way as to make use of the categories of culture, rather than being used by them.

Of course whatever is "problematized" is called into question. But no questions are posed in this Preface. Instead, Bercovitch simply asserts those propositions that have already been assumed to be true by some of his dissident young professors. These propositions, however, are not givens; they require elaboration and demonstration.

Genuinely to problematize this methodology of literary history would be to ask *how*

2 *Reconstructing American Literary History*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch; Harvard University Press, 384 pages, \$20. *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen; Cambridge University Press, 476 pages, \$34.50.

race, class, and gender could ever be “formal principles of art.” Is there, for example, a black imagination, as opposed to a white one? Is there a demonstrable gender-caused difference—in structure, style, syntax, vocabulary, and imagery—between men’s and women’s writing? Can we elicit *formal* differences between the sonnets of the aristocrat Lord Byron and those of cockney Johnny Keats? I doubt it, but then I incline more than Bercovitch to universals, a term he invariably puts in quotation marks. Further, what does it mean to personify a literary figure and to suggest that a trope or a narrative device *uses* a historian (is he a mindless instrument?) with the sinister motive of enforcing certain views of the past? What trope has this malign power? What views of the past does it wish to perpetuate? I hope that we shall have the elaboration of these propositions, the answers to these questions, in the forthcoming history. But since on the surface they appear to be nonsense, I expect to be disappointed. In the meantime, it seems clear that the Cambridge historians will easily inscribe their own ideological norms in the forthcoming work. For the implication of this passage is that there are no universals on which historical or aesthetic judgment may be grounded.

The second volume, *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, makes plainer how Bercovitch and his associates will address issues of myth and ideology in American writing. For Bercovitch, the literary work “can no more transcend ideology than an artist’s mind can transcend psychology.” He concedes that the general point of view of the authors “falls within the left-wing of the political spectrum, and that that bias is reflected in this volume,” so we ought to be under no illusion about what view of ideology will be reflected. The intent of the book will be to demystify the hidden assumptions of the “American Way” in our best writers by subjecting them to an unmasking founded upon a leftist perspective superior to that reflected in the writers’ work.

The opening piece, “Introduction: Beyond Transcendence,” by Myra Jehlen, gives a

potted history of the term “ideology” that arrives at the astonishing conclusion that ideology has meant many things to many people: for Marx it was the false consciousness that rationalized capitalist exploitation; but for Weber it was the admirable driving energy that produced a new economic system, etc. In the Afterword, Bercovitch offers a commentary on the essays in the volume. The pieces in between are a mixed bag. Old stalwarts of the American Studies approach are represented: Henry Nash Smith ruminating on the negative forms of the frontier experience that he left out of *Virgin Land*; Leo Marx asserting yet again the pastoral theme in our writing. But younger and more radical critics are represented as well: Carolyn Porter on “Reification and American Literature,” Jonathan Arac on “The Politics of *The Scarlet Letter*,” and James H. Kavanagh on “‘Benito Cereno’ and the Liberal Hero.”

Bercovitch’s Preface to the first volume and his Afterword to the second echo each other and repeat the prospectus of the forthcoming history, often in identical language. But the Afterword, though cagey in its formulations, is more explicit about his own views. For Bercovitch, “America” is a loaded term that implies a consensus about our past, present, and future, but the country is to him diverse, pluralistic, and resistant to the consensus view. Further, he sees our founding statesmen, writers, and politicians—and those who followed them—as having wrongly constricted the terms of the debate about what we are or should become. Their political and social judgments were formed wholly within the framework of a dominating Anglo-American ideology designed to satisfy “the needs of the same open-market society.” Couldn’t they, shouldn’t they, have considered some of the real “oppositional or alternative forms of social organization,” say, those considered “in revolutionary France and Latin America”? For Bercovitch, the spokesmen for the American Way “were speaking for a system of values so deeply ingrained they could assume it was simply common sense.” What

a trivialization of the political and social wisdom of the Founding Fathers and the long line of national leaders who have managed to preserve the oldest republic in the world! You would think that Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and the rest knew nothing about ancient and modern European political, economic, and social systems, and accidentally produced a constitution for liberal democracy while trying to preserve a free market for imported, untaxed English tea.

Not all of Bercovitch's contributors are by any means as radical as he is. In fact, he complains that a number of them are unwitting victims of that distinctively American Way of responding to dissent—the way in which one listens to it and, through legal measures, incorporates its suggestions for change wherever they have merit. (This is the famous “liberal co-optation” by which Emerson, Melville, and other “subversive” critics of America have been assimilated into “the dominant ideology.”) In this Bercovitch is reminiscent of Herbert Marcuse fulminating about the “repressiveness” of America’s *tolerance* for alternative points of view. At the bottom of all this is Bercovitch’s utopian hope that his view of ideology will re-orient the way literary historians treat the past and lead to “alternative [he means left-wing] ways of intellectual, moral, and political commitment.” Luckily for us, no significant change in our political structures is likely to occur as a result of this book, which Bercovitch concedes might just be merely “a radical discourse about American culture in what is after all a rather *traditional* exchange among professional *literary* critics.”

But let us return again to the Bercovitch prospectus for the new literary history. So far as the received tradition of American literature is concerned, the new Cambridge history intends to rectify the alleged “exclusion” of “entire bodies of literature (and by implication entire ‘literary communities’)”—whatever they may be—from the canon. This no doubt means that a new claim to importance will be made for the tales of the aboriginal tribes, for the “suppressed literature of women,” for the minority voices of

blacks, Hispanics, and others who have been neglected by previous literary historians. But no specifics are given.

One wishes them well in setting straight the historical record. But so far as the canon is concerned, no drum-beating for the historical importance of this or that writer, much less for this or that “literary community,” is likely to have more than a transient effect on the shaping of the canon. The canon, like the Kingdom of Heaven, cannot be entered by force. Nor can artistically mediocre but “doctrinally correct” poems or novels be forced into it by passionate ideologies. For the canon arises from a complex, ongoing multiplicity of aesthetic judgments, involving a great many readers of taste and discrimination, over a long period of time. Classics survive because, whether they are historically representative or not, we will not willingly let them die. Those works which, because of aesthetic deficiencies, cease to speak to us fade into the background, become a part of the mere context of great writers.

It is worthwhile to re-examine such works from time to time. Occasionally, neglected writers of the past are rediscovered. But rarely do proclaimed discoveries disarrange the canon. The reason is that most of the rediscovered writers, like Elizabeth Stoddard, turn out to be not as good as they are claimed to be. Eliot observed in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that the existing literary monuments formed “an ideal order among themselves,” which could be modified only by the “supervention of novelty,” that is, by the introduction of “the new (the really new) work of art among them.” Hence the celebration of a new writer, or the fresh interest in an old writer who has faded in importance, is warranted only if his work manifests the authentic originality of the true masters. Most of the claims for allegedly suppressed writers, for excluded bodies of literature and ignored “literary communities,” are founded not on aesthetic criteria but on an ideology of egalitarian political thought. They play upon our democratic sympathies but ordinarily have nothing to

do with art. Even if such writers are trumpeted in the new histories, even if they are squeezed into the already monstrously swollen and indiscriminate schoolroom anthologies, such politically motivated puffery can never have a permanent effect, in a free society, on the aesthetic judgments by which the canon, over time, is formed.

In any case, for the new Cambridge literary historians "in a time of dissensus," there appears to be no ideal order of existing literary monuments, no aesthetic principle of universal provenance, no standard of artistic judgment transcending relativist historicism. Bercovitch attributes to his collaborators "a healthy liminal scepticism about the formulaic, the natural, the self-evident." No one can object to that. But for many of us, the dissensus of the Sixties and Seventies ruined virtually a whole generation of graduates by subverting all ideas of objective principle, rigor of method, adequacy of evidence, rational argumentation, etc. A common result in that time, in student bodies, was the lethal mixture of ideological passion and intellectual incompetence or else a supercilious skepticism that made out to be bourgeois and obsolete all value-oriented thinking.

It will be interesting to see what these twenty-two skeptical products of the times will themselves produce. Will they generate a new synthesis of historical understanding? Will they penetrate to that truth of the past in which we can believe? Will their work conform to those "laws of nature and the mind" to which—without apparent irony—Professor Bercovitch earlier referred? Here he is on the probable result of their work: "... it seems likely that we will not, thank God, arrive at some sweeping new synthesis. I hope our History will set directions in American literary scholarship for the next generations; but I think it's safe to say that it will not lead them, like that fabled pillar of fire, out of the wilderness of difference, partiality, and debate into a Canaan of unmediated truth."

The prospects are thus not encouraging. For me, at least, the laws of nature constitute a oneness which I have yet cognitively to grasp in full but which my prior experience of truth leads me to posit as a theoretically knowable reality. And it appears to be one of the laws of my mind that it is dissatisfied until it has apprehended the principle of unity by which the diverse particulars of a whole—say, the history of our literature—are organized. But in this I am not alone: a very great tradition in the history of science and philosophy confirms for me that these conclusions have been true for others as well.

Truth, as Aristotle observed, inheres in predication, in saying or affirming "something about something." Epistemological error or the moral defect of lying may falsify a predication, which does not stand in an absolute relation to being. But the true thing said about something is not an assignment to it; the truth inheres in the something and is disclosed by the analysis that produces the predication. Meaning, then, is not made or externally assigned; it is discovered; it is a disclosure. The something that is the subject of interrogation—say, our literary history—has a truth to disclose, to reveal to us. If this new Cambridge group thinks truth to be a fable and synthetic judgment a sham, then they are masters of cynicism and nihilism working in the service of a will to power. If they are not, let them declare the positive meaning that may be affirmed in consequence of an informed historical understanding of our literary past; let them announce the forms of the good and the true and the beautiful that are disclosed in the history of our literature. In the meantime, I intend to hang onto the *Literary History of the United States*. It is not a perfect literary history, as I have tried to show, but it does not scruple to affirm those American values, celebrated by some of our best writers, that are still worth cherishing.

A peculiarly dark utopian: H. G. Wells

by Brad Leithauser

"Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain" was the subtitle H. G. Wells gave to his voluminous *Experiment in Autobiography*, and having got off to an unbeatably modest start, he went on to confess that much of his literary output had been "slovenly, haggard and irritated," as well as "hurried and inadequately revised." Of the "gray matter of that organized mass of phosphorized fat and connective tissue" which he identified as the "hero" of his autobiography, he noted that its thinking was "slack" and "easily fatigued." By way of summary, he hypothesized that "If there were brain-shows, as there are cat and dog shows, I doubt if it would get even a third class prize."

If modesty is a rare trait among world-famous authors, rarer still is the ability—which Wells possessed in abundance—to analyze perceptively one's own literary shortcomings. The critic who sorts through Wells's prodigious oeuvre (he had published more than one hundred books before his death in 1946 at the age of seventy-nine) must be struck by how often Wells identified, and hence partially disarmed, whatever objections might be made against him. His fiction, he warned us, depended on "conventional types and symbols"; his "psychologically unsubtle" novels could be "artless self-revelatory stuff"; and as a stylist he "did not worry much about finish."

Protestations of this sort seemed excessive or insincere to a number of critics when

Experiment in Autobiography was published in 1934, but Wells clung stoutly to his assertions of mediocrity. In a manuscript entitled "Postscript to an Experiment in Autobiography"—recently published, along with other personal addenda, as *H. G. Wells in Love*—he accused those who would find him guilty of an "inverted arrogance" of treating him with undue cynicism. "I meant exactly what I said; it was a very typical common brain," Wells reiterated, but added that it had one great strength, a "disposition to straightforwardness."

Straightforward he certainly could be—often scandalously so. He outraged English society, and suffered the loss of many friendships, as a result of his open and incessant sexual promiscuity. Both in conversation and in print he was a tireless proponent of free love, although one whose urgings at times had a curiously businesslike tone that seems tinged by the Protestant work ethic: "A man or woman ought to have sexual intercourse. Few people are mentally, or morally, or physically in health without it. For everyone there is a minimum and maximum below which lies complete efficiency. Find out your equation, say I, and then keep efficient."

Today, Wells's reputation as a libertine seems to have overshadowed the spanning range of his iconoclasm, and one is apt to forget that he waged war against his country's legal system, military system, and educational system, its class prejudices and social

customs and religious traditions—against most of what made England England. He railed, in fact, against anything he deemed an obstruction to the emergence of a “planned world-state,” a cause that Wells in middle age came to adopt as his “personal religion.” Although Wells was an atheist for most of his adult life, his fervent belief in the redemptive powers of rationalism characteristically partook of religious trappings and rhetoric. “The idea of creative service to the World-State towards which the modern mind is gravitating,” Wells wrote at the end of *Experiment in Autobiography*, “differs widely in its explicitness, its ordered content and its practical urgency, from the All of Being, the Inner Life, the Ultimate Truth . . . and all those other resorts of the older religions, but its releasing and enveloping relation to the individual *persona* is, in spite of all that difference of substance, almost precisely the same.” The emergence of the world-state was “inevitable,” Wells repeatedly insisted, and yet he bridled with impatience at anything that seemed to hinder its progress.

For all the confidence of Wells’s predictions, our globe’s various nation-states have not disappeared—but neither have the books of this “slovenly” artist. His novels continue to attract a readership whose diversity is almost unparalleled in our century. What other modern writer could boast of having won the loyalties of children, science fiction buffs, and exacting literary aristocrats like Borges and Nabokov? His books are accommodatingly multi-tiered, permitting child and sophisticate alike to feel that he speaks to them on their own level. With his roundabout locutions and his quaint vocabulary (“contraposed,” “ostended,” “incontinently”), Wells seems on occasion a solidly Victorian writer; at other moments, especially in his best science fiction, he can seem a contemporary figure or even (given that so few contemporary authors display much interest in the scientific and technological revolution that daily transmogrifies the world they live in) a writer who is slightly ahead of our time. Manifest in nearly every-

thing he wrote was prodigious intellectual energy—the strong sense of a mind that is probing continuously as it goes. His investigations displayed, for the most part, an impressive scientific impartiality; he analyzed himself with the same cool rigor that he trained upon the external world. And surely one source of Wells’s potent literary appeal resides in that paradox whereby, in book after book, this most straightforward and analytical of authors remained an oddly elusive figure.

If Wells remains elusive, it is not for lack of interpreters. He has been the subject of numerous biographies. The most recent, and in many ways the most imposing, is David C. Smith’s *Desperately Mortal*.¹ Wells was not merely extraordinarily prolific, he was also peripatetic on a grand scale, and Smith has been commendably dogged in sorting out and recreating Wells’s journeys through Italy, Russia, India, Australia, and America. Smith has evidently dug through mountains of manuscript material, and the student of Wells must be grateful for the many fresh quotations and anecdotes that he supplies. And yet, despite the bulk of this newest biography, Wells remains a curiously inert figure in its pages. It would appear that Smith has been too respectful—one might even say cowed—in his approach to his subject. Certainly, Smith too often takes Wells, with all his rationalistic claims, at his word. What is frequently missing from this book is the complement to Wells’s optimistic rationalism—that side to the man which could be despondent and cold and resentful and childishly selfish.

Readers in search of a more vibrant portrait might better begin with Anthony West’s biography, *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, even if, as its title suggests, it makes no attempt to be exhaustive. According to West, Wells remains elusive partly because he was sometimes misleading or dishonest when writing about himself. West ought to

1 *Desperately Mortal*, by David C. Smith; Yale University Press, 634 pages, \$29.95.

know. As the illegitimate son of Wells and Rebecca West, he approaches his subject from a unique vantage, singularly intimate and distanced at the same time. The scandalous love affair between the very young, very driven Rebecca and the middle-aged, hugely successful, but also very driven Wells, which began in 1913 and produced Anthony the following year, was tempestuous even in its happiest times, and left after its final dissolution in 1923 a great residue of resentment on both sides. Anthony, the sole child of the affair, was raised by his mother, and therefore must for many years have perceived his father through the filter of hostile eyes. But most of the biography's venom—of which there is a great store—is reserved for Rebecca, whom her son portrays as a scheming woman whose accounts of her love affair with Wells are self-pitying and self-serving. Anthony West regards his father with affection and forgiveness, even when airing his dishonesties and obliquities, which were considerable; for all of Wells's advocacy of sexual candor, he was, according to his son, a man compelled to seek out situations that would require dissembling or double-dealing. Wells was also less than candid—though perhaps understandably so—when writing about his troubled childhood. His autobiography gives a touched-up portrait of his father, the failed proprietor of a china shop, who was, in addition to other shortcomings, an extraordinarily immature man, and of his mother, a former lady's maid, who bitterly resented her husband for removing her from the elevated society she had, however collaterally, once inhabited.

Yet the chief source of Wells's elusiveness is probably located in something more unusual than mere fabrications or omissions of aspects of his personal life. Wells was a literary pioneer in so many ways that even now, four decades after his death, his work resists categorization. He is, for example, often regarded as the "father of science fiction," but this was a genre not yet identified when Wells, beginning with *The Time Machine* in 1895, embarked upon that remarkable collection of books which he called "scientific

romances" and which are likely to prove his most durable achievement. It was not until the Twenties that the term "science fiction" achieved wide currency through Hugo Gernsback, the founder of *Amazing Stories* magazine, and probably not until the Thirties or Forties that the reading public had assembled some common notions about the powers and limitations of this fledgling genre. Wells found himself, then, in a peculiar position, both exhilarating and perplexing: he was a writer of a type of genre fiction that had not yet become a genre. As far as Wells and his readers knew, his scientific romances were not so much progenitors as descendants—the heirs to books like Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and even Lucian's *A True Story*. One can understand why Joseph Conrad appeared so happily nonplussed when writing to Wells of *The Invisible Man*: "Impressed is the word, O Realist of the Fantastic." It must have been in some ways a liberating advantage for Wells not to know that he was working in what critics would later determine was a limited and ancillary literary form; on the other hand, he felt at times unhappily confused about where he stood as an artist, and he spent much of his life trying, with only fair success, to define his theory of the novel and to map the sources of his own originality.

Wells's earliest articles and stories were published almost a hundred years ago, and surely by now we ought to have some solid grasp on his literary strengths and weaknesses, and on the relationship between "mainstream" fiction and its heady young offspring, science fiction. And yet, as Frank McConnell argues in *The Science Fiction of H. G. Wells*, we may have misunderstood Wells by "understanding" him too easily, and thereby arranged to misinterpret the character of science fiction as well. According to McConnell, "Wells may not have been the first man to acknowledge the importance of Darwinian theory for the future of civilization and the business of fiction, but he was certainly the first to acknowledge and assimilate that theory, in all its corrosive

effect upon ideas of what fiction was for and about” and “not until *The Time Machine* did the real power, and the real terror, of evolutionary theory find adequate expression in fiction.” Wells came by his understanding of Darwin through an unrivaled source: T. H. Huxley, with whom Wells studied at the Normal School of Science in South Kensington during the 1884-85 school year. Wells quickly perceived that although Darwin’s *Origin of Species* had been hugely controversial since its publication in 1859, much of its import had not yet been assimilated by the public at large. Taking Wells’s realization a step further, McConnell suggests that many of the theory’s more disturbing implications have still not been absorbed by a public ready now to dismiss the theory as old hat, and this failure helps explain why Wells’s work sometimes goes unappreciated today. McConnell singles out *The Island of Dr. Moreau* as a book from whose disturbing satirical notions (among them, “the great difference between man and monkey is in the larynx”) the reader is apt to retreat with a visceral distaste that is soon conveniently translated into aesthetic disapproval. Wells himself was constantly aware of the temptations and dangers in misreading Darwin. He chided George Bernard Shaw for shying away from “the heartless impartiality of natural causation” and “endowing it with an ultimately benevolent Life Force,” and he ridiculed Catholic theologians for discovering that “the Church had always known all about Evolution and the place of man in Nature, just as it had always known all about the place of the solar system in space.”

McConnell calls *The Time Machine* a “masterpiece” and a “great first book”—claims that must be disputed by anyone eager to uphold the notion that ultimate justice is at work in the distribution of literary classics: surely no masterpiece ought to be put together so quickly and haphazardly. Wells had manifestly little sense of where he was going in this brief novel. The story’s genesis lay in an impossibly arch, deservedly aban-

doned short story, “The Chronic Argonauts,” in which the main character bears the name of Dr. Nebo Gipfel. This tale was then recast for possible publication in W. E. Henley’s magazine *The National Observer* as a series of reflective articles about time travel. The series fell so far short of editorial expectations that it was canceled before completion—and might have been forever abandoned had not Henley, now installed as the editor of the *New Review*, requested that it be reworked in a shape closer to the book we know today. In any case, the novel shows signs of laxness and haste throughout. What is intended as its one tragic scene—the death of Weena, the little woman of the future who befriends the Time Traveller—teeters precariously on the rim of bathos. And the book’s most haunting passage, in which the Time Traveller takes his machine forward into the future, further and further, until he winds up on a dying shore under a dead exploded sun, did not originate with Wells himself; it was a postscript to the story appended at Henley’s suggestion.

Clumsy, uncertain, bathetic it may at times be, and yet *The Time Machine* brims with an unmatched wonder and sweep and originality that render McConnell’s claims plausible after all. (So much for the cause of ultimate literary justice . . .) Wells helped to bring a new strength to the English novel: an awareness of something beguiling, even voluptuous, in the cool—and, for some, godless—splendors of modern science. What other novelist of his time (or, for that matter, of ours) could have peered at a “mere rock” under a microscope and beheld there what Wells did? “One saw the jumbled crystals thrust against each other, distorted by unknown pressures, clouded and stained by obscure infiltrations . . . It was not simply an astounding loveliness, it was, one felt, a profoundly significant loveliness that these sections revealed. They were telling in this bright clear and glowing fashion, of tensions, solutions, releases, the steady creeping of molecule past molecule, age after age. And in their interpretation lay the history and understanding of the Earth as a whole.”

Wells found in evolutionary theory not merely a challenge to traditional religious notions but a demand for a new morality: "Soon, for very many, as now for only a few, the pursuit of Science will become a part of the Moral Law. It will be felt as an imperative that, in order to do that which is right, man must know that which is true."

The Time Machine is unmistakably the work of a man who perceived in our slow-evolving planet, in its stones no less than in its life forms, a scientific and yet magical process—one all the more magical for being deducible. And that magic is evident from the first page of this, his first book. Already Wells had found that marvelously matter-of-fact tone, seemingly so collected and direct, by which he would over the years propel his readers again and again into the realm of the fantastic: "The Time Traveller (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) was expounding a recondite matter to us. His gray eyes shone and twinkled, and his usually pale face was flushed and animated." (The opening of *The War of the Worlds* offers a similar magic in rational dress: "No one would have believed, in the last years of the nineteenth century, that human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own" That slippery reference, or near-reference, to God—the greater but immortal intelligence in which people *would* have believed—is a brilliant, off-putting stroke.) And the streamlined *Time Machine*, unlike many of his later novels, which are often laden with wooden dialogue and weighty didacticism, never relinquishes its magical hold.

The story opens with a dinner party at the home of the Time Traveller. The party includes a doctor, a psychologist, a mayor, and the book's "I," who is notable chiefly for the open-mindedness with which he, unlike the other guests, listens to his host. After a leisurely meal, the Time Traveller begins to speculate about the emerging, still unfamiliar notion of Time as a fourth dimension, and raises the possibility of directed travel through the ages. In fact, he

reveals to his guests, he has been engaged in a little experimentation, and would like now to provide a modest demonstration. He leads them out to his laboratory and displays a small, puzzling device, "scarcely larger than a small clock, and very delicately made." When, at the Time Traveller's bidding, the psychologist turns one of its tiny levers, the device swings around, fades, and disappears—possibly to race for all of eternity into eternity. The guests, naturally skeptical, ask to be let in on the "trick." But the Time Traveller insists that what they have witnessed is not magic but science. He arranges to have them return in a week, by which time he hopes to advance some more convincing demonstration.

When the guests arrive a week later, their host is nowhere to be found. They decide to dine without him in the hope that he will soon appear—which he does in thunderous fashion, staggering into the party in a ragged and semi-delirious state. His clothes are bloodstained and his hair appears to have whitened. He reports that he has just returned from a sojourn of eight days in the world of the year A.D. 802,701.

The future the Time Traveller paints for his skeptical guests is a ghastly place. The class divisions of industrialized nineteenth-century England have led to a genetic bifurcation: mankind has split into two species. The Eloi are pretty, feckless creatures whose "too-perfect security" has apparently led to a "general dwindling of size, strength, and intelligence." They inhabit a beautiful garden world in which they spend their childish days eating fruit, picking flowers, and playing games. The wan, disgusting Morlocks inhabit a network of deep tunnels in the earth, where they toil amid clanking machinery. They are the end product of those pent-up colliers and factory workers, who, sunless as ghosts, haunted the humanitarian conscience of Victorian England. To the Time Traveller, the world initially appears to belong to the Eloi—but it turns out that their imparadised days conceal a life of nocturnal terror, of dark raids by the Morlocks,

who cannibalize them. (The Eloi will inevitably evoke for the contemporary reader the “flower children” of the Hippies’ heyday, and to see them eventually eaten up by the representatives of industry lends the novel a painful black humor.)

The book has some wonderfully spooky moments. The Time Traveller’s discovery, at the end of an idyllic day, that his machine has disappeared is one of the bleakest scenes in literature. To contemplate being trapped forever, as the Time Traveller apparently is, in the year A.D. 802,701, is to perceive Robinson Crusoe as a man who had merely gone off for a weekend at the seashore; the book widens our definitions of what exile can be. Later in the novel, the Time Traveller’s fumbling struggle with a match, while the clambering Morlocks attempt to overpower him in the darkness, is almost insupportably claustrophobic. And, even if the idea did originate with Henley, that final journey to the world’s end is a haunting triumph. Like the poet in the Keats sonnet, the Time Traveller stands on “the shore of the wide world,” confronting an image of death before which “love and fame to nothingness do sink.” Indeed, this sonnet may have been in Wells’s mind—he was an avid reader of Romantic poetry—during the composition of the book’s last pages.

And yet for all of Wells’s temperamental ties to the Romantics, the final desolating vision of *The Time Machine* was one that they, writing in the first half of the nineteenth century, could never have conceived. Death itself had been transformed in the century’s intervening decades. Darwin’s work had altered forever the condition of *homo sapiens*—had rendered man a changing, transitional animal, to be understood only when viewed across those monumental geological epochs that our Time Traveller had traversed in order to beach up on his dying shore. What Wells had absorbed—so profoundly that it reconstructed his soul—was the notion, apparently simple but finally revolutionary, that many of humankind’s most significant certainties are to be found millions of years away. We cannot begin to

say what will happen in Europe next month, but we might speak assuredly about the fate of the earth: the sun will burn out, life as we know it will disappear.

And unlike the Romantics, Wells’s universe could be explained—or so the scientist in him would have it—without recourse to the notion of God. The principle of natural selection provided Wells with a means of explaining not only the birth of mankind but also its probable lines of development. Wells found in Darwinism a method of extrapolation. “I flung myself into futurity,” the Time Traveller at one point announces to his startled guests—and the same could be said of Wells’s adult imagination. “We overrate the darkness of the future,” he wrote in his autobiography—and so he pluckily set forth, hoping in his novels and essays to reveal truths about the near future (which he was to discover chiefly through the study of politics and sociology) and about the distant future (to be discerned through biology, astronomy, and physics).

Truths of this latter, distant sort are often regarded as hidden in the “mists of time,” veiled by numbers so vast they smother the intellect, but it was Wells’s particular virtue to discern determinate shapes in these mists (he prided himself on having a “brain good for outlines”); the death of the sun, for example, was no less real for being far away. And it seemed possible to Wells that he might identify the directions in which evolution was impelling not only the human body but the human brain and its thinking. Wells considered himself lucky to have reached adulthood at a time when a confluence of scientific discoveries—biological, paleontological, astronomical—was working to raze some of the walls by which mankind’s conception of itself had always been bound; and unlike so many of his contemporaries, who seemed to find these new vistas numbing or threatening, Wells peered into the freshly opened expanses and found them exhilarating. He felt that he had been given an opportunity to glean at least some inkling of the future’s possibilities. He made this point quite memorably in 1902, in one

of his earliest public lectures: "All this world is heavy with the promise of greater things, and a day will come—one day in the unending succession of days—when beings, beings who are now latent in our thoughts and hidden in our loins, will stand upon this earth as one stands upon a footstool, and laugh, and reach out their hands amidst the stars."

Wells's grasp of the principle of evolution was in itself a source of great literary verve and originality; but it became something more—became perhaps the distinctive genius of his imagination—when combined with a second historical insight. Far more lucidly than most of his contemporaries, Wells perceived that modern science had recently launched the entire world toward a revolution. He seemed to understand intuitively how far-reaching and irreversible were the transformations that technology was effecting across the globe. While his contemporaries were apt to regard the Wright brothers' airplane as a delightful curiosity, Wells saw in its brief ascent a confirmation of his suspicions that humanity might eventually master the air—and the airless vacuums of space. Early in his career, he recognized technology's fundamental force as a "change in the scale of human relationships and human enterprises brought about by increased facilities of communication"—an insight equally applicable to the "information age" of our ongoing computer revolution.

This vision of a rapidly evolving, technology-dominated future enriched and balanced Wells's other, grander vision of a world millennially shaped by the promptings of evolutionary trial and error. If his Darwinism encouraged in Wells a sense of weary fatalism, the promise of technology kindled urgency and hope; what originated in man presumably might be steered by man, and Wells vowed to do everything possible to see that the new technological age turned out as it should. He became an incurable utopian, who converted to the "religion" of the scientific world-state even while recognizing technology's potential

dangers. He was, in short, a peculiarly dark utopian—one whose visions, both short-term and long-term, were colored by glimpses of apocalypse. The apocalyptic held a murky appeal for Wells, who seemed at times impatiently to feel that his awaited heaven-on-earth might most expeditiously be achieved through vaguely fascistic intellectual strong men or through the purging of a "war that will end war"—a phrase, incidentally, of Wells's own coinage, and one that came back to haunt him in the early months of the First World War, as it became deadeningly apparent that carnage would usher in neither wisdom nor unselfishness.

Wells's celebrated literary dispute with Henry James, which brewed for a number of years before coming to a head in 1913, is perhaps best understood in relation to his "dark" utopianism. James had seen much to admire in Wells's early work, particularly the social comedies in which Wells was, in his own words, seeking to create along "Dickens-Thackeray lines." James had called *Kipps*, published in 1905, a work of "genius" and of "TRUE truth." But James had found later books disappointing, and in September of 1913 wrote rather imposingly to Wells to say so. James lamented the shallowness of Wells's characterizations in the recently published *The Passionate Friends*, a complaint that struck Wells at a doubly vulnerable point: it forced him to confront not only this particular book's possible shortcomings but also his larger inability to define his aesthetic ends. Wells had no clear rebuttal to James's consciously noble belief in the primacy of the artist. ("It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance," James wrote to Wells.) He had by way of answer only a vague sense that his books were devoted to something larger than art, to the cause of human progress in a confused and imperiled age.

The two men aired their differences in a variety of ways, but chiefly by letter. James is generally perceived as the clear winner of this exchange, so much so that one may be tempted to regard Wells's replies with con-

descension. In retrospect, the debate does look hopelessly lopsided, given that James was an exacting, deliberative genius and Wells at best a haphazard, intuitive one. And Wells's unwillingness to put the debate behind him, to resolve it and let it go, has all the earmarks of the smarting loser; it is a little depressing to see him in his autobiography, two decades later, still carrying on a one-sided debate with James's formidable ghost.

And yet eventually, as the Time Traveller himself discovered, determinations about who is the victor and who the vanquished can prove tricky; it may well be that in the end Wells comes off respectably. Certainly with each passing decade one must grow more forgiving of the inarticulateness of his literary theorizing; it becomes increasingly apparent to us, as so much of the technology Wells foresaw pervades our lives, that he was attempting to open his fiction to processes and objects that in the end must be allowed to enter our literature.

As an artist, he seems to have felt both pride and a bit of impatient loneliness about his passion for science. He worked hard to convert others to his point of view. He served for a time as a driving force in a group called The Committee on the Neglect of Science, which sought, among other things, to increase the time that students in state-supported institutions spent in the study of science. Wells turned with such eagerness to the young in part because he felt that his own generation, even its intellectuals and artists, was in this matter almost beyond redemption. At one point in his autobiography, Wells lumped together some of his most prepossessing literary contemporaries—Conrad, James, Crane, Shaw—and called them “uneducated.” Shaw, in particular, had “no sustained and constructive mental thinking” and was a “philanderer with facts.” All of these men lacked, according to Wells, a “central philosophy,” and hence they “lapsed—though retaining their distinctive scale and quality—towards the inner arbitrariness and unreality of the untrained common man.” He felt, and the

years would appear to bear him out, that in failing to come to grips with the rational powers of modern science they were failing to see things whole.

Wells's perception of himself as a man with an urgent, and for the most part unappreciated, insight into the revolutionary impact of technology led him rather naturally into didacticism; whether presenting himself as essayist or novelist, he remained a man with a message. Ours is not an age that feels comfortable with didactic fiction (it is hard to feel so, these days, with all of those Soviet attempts to render art “useful” casting so damp a shadow before us), but if we are to be fair to Wells, we must seek to approach freshly the notion of instructive art. It is true that much of his work was an attempt to educate and prepare readers for an “inevitable” social revolution—and yet how lightly the best of his books, especially the scientific romances, wear their purposeful designs! *The War of the Worlds*, for example, is in part an explicit attack on British colonialism (the heartlessness with which the Martians slaughter mankind is repeatedly analogized to British indifference about “primitive” peoples), but the book never seems a mere political tract. In foregoing character study and the subtleties of emotional interchange in his novels—in foregoing, that is, the range of personal dealings that most of his contemporaries regarded as the proper province of fiction—Wells restricted himself far less than one might have supposed. Anthony West describes his father as a “visualizer,” but it seems appropriate instead to invoke that grander and much overused term, a “visionary.”

For Wells had an extraordinary eye, both in its venturesomeness (eager to wander off into the future, or out to another planet, or down to the bottom of the sea) and in the keen particularity with which it would abruptly fix upon some singular, telling detail. *The Time Machine* is probably Wells's finest visionary achievement, but all of the scientific romances have their moments of glorious vision, images apt to linger in the

mind long after the characters' names and professions and foibles and difficulties have vanished. What reader could soon forget the picture of an unpeopled London tropically overrun by scarlet Martian plants at the close of *The War of the Worlds*? Or the night journey by rowboat in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, during which a crewman's eye glints greenly, the reader's first unignorable hint that here is someone who isn't quite human? These are images that momentarily require us to revise our world—much as Swift (a writer Wells loved and emulated) made us look anew at the nature of time when he gave us Lilliputians with such finely calibrated eyesight that they could discern the continuous, minuscule creeping of a clock's hour hand.

As Wells moved into an august middle age, his sense of himself as a messenger and teacher eclipsed what had been most purely artful in his novels, until he reached a point where he claimed that he had never been an artist at all, but merely a "journalist." In retrospect, this remark looks like a defensive gesture, an attempt to exempt himself altogether from the sort of stinging criticisms James had once directed at him. Wells alternately argued, more persuasively, that his work represented an attempt to expand the novel, to make it a congenial place for, among other things, the "philosophical dialogue"—and if this pursuit required his characters to "indulge in impossibly explicit monologues and duologues," then he would just have to let the demands of naturalism suffer. Valiant and expansive as his intentions may have been, however, posterity has not regarded the later Wells generously. Nearly everything of his that it has chosen to preserve—the scientific romances, and the "Dickens-Thackeray" comedies like *Tono-Bungay* and *Mr. Polly*—were written early in his career, before his literary falling-out with James, before the arrival of the Great War, and before—perhaps most discouraging of all for this impatient utopian—peace at last returned, only to bring with it a widespread, unthinking conviction that business could again go on as usual.

However harshly one views Wells's later work, there is something irresistibly bracing in the picture of this vigorous old man who was forever dashing off a new manuscript to his publishers. To have written more than a hundred books and still feel, as Wells did at the age of seventy-five, "intolerable impatience lest some unforeseen obstacle should hold up this most urgent and conclusive work," bespeaks an unmatched capacity for hopefulness and ambition. Probably no other author of our century has been so breathtakingly ambitious while managing to make his goals sound rational and perhaps even reachable. When, in 1920, Wells published *The Outline of History* (a book whose astonishing sweep—it begins with our Paleolithic origins and concludes with projections about our future—was arguably grander than any volume the world had ever seen), he claimed to have provisionally provided "just that general review of reality of which we stood in such manifest need if any permanent political unity was to be sustained in the world." If this talk sounds bold, Wells certainly had justification for his boldness is the book's success: *The Outline of History* was the third greatest seller of its age, surpassed by only the Bible and the Koran. And when this book was supplemented in 1930 by *The Science of Life* (in which Wells attempted to set out "everything that an educated man—to be an educated man—ought to know about biological science") and in 1931 by *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* (which Wells described as an attempt "to fuse and recast" social, political, and economic science "into one intelligible review of Man upon his planet"), Wells had accomplished—it might plausibly be argued—one of the most remarkable feats in the history of education. Wells himself, anyway, made an even grander claim for his new series of textbooks: "these three works taken together do, I believe, still give a clearer, fuller and compacter summary of what the normal citizen of the modern state should know, than any other group of books in existence."

And yet the process by which that modern

world-state might actually emerge remained nebulous. Wells watched the years go by with gathering alarm. Neither the rigors of the Great Depression nor the widening destruction of the Second World War appeared to foster among nations any rational recognition of their common aims and needs. Toward the very end of his life, Wells painfully renounced his seemingly unshakeable optimism. In *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, published the year before he died, he proposed that mankind had no future at all.

Despair had been an intermittent and yet insistent presence in his work all along, but only with the emergence of *H. G. Wells in Love* could the reader clearly see the degree to which Wells could be privately afflicted by darkness while publicly professing optimism. Liberated by the knowledge that this Postscript would appear only posthumously, he gave in to doubts he had banished from the autobiography; when he speaks in the Postscript of his cherished world-state, he sounds oddly wistful. The Postscript concludes with a chapter called "Shadow of Age: the Suicidal Mood," which Wells inserted and removed from his manuscript numerous times as it sat unpublished over the years. This short chapter offers a touchingly simple portrayal of a man weighted with difficulties he cannot outwardly admit and with a somewhat surprising capacity for self-dislike: "The most conclusive argument for suicide I find in my mind is the conviction of my own unworthiness Sometimes I realize something in myself so silly, fitful and entirely inadequate to opportunity, that I feel even by my own standards I am not fit to live." Wells ultimately decided to delete this chapter from the manuscript, a decision posthumously overturned by his son G. P. Wells, the editor of *H. G. Wells in Love*, who thought it "too interesting, and too relevant" to conceal forever.

H. G. Wells in Love takes its epigraph from a passing observation in *Experiment in Autobiography*: "This particular brain . . . has arrived at the establishment of the Socialist World-State as its directive purpose and has made that its religion and end. Other sys-

tems of feeling and motive run across or with or against the main theme I suspect the sexual system should be at least the second theme, when it is not the first, in every autobiography, honestly and fully told." The Postscript would redress that imbalance through a candid, serial account of sexual triumphs. The result is a colorful, lively, sometimes shocking, often humorous—and in the end pretty depressing—account. Wells prefaces his chronicle with some characteristically modest doubts. Although never "able to discover whether my interest in sex is more than normal," he is "inclined to think that I have been less obsessed by these desires and imaginations than the average man"—and then plunges into a numbingly long catalogue of seductions and sexual conquests. Wells's account of his dealings with women purports to be not merely one man's "particular story" but a "tale of a world of dislocated sexual relations and failure to adjust." It is subtitled "On Loves and the Lover-Shadow," and opens with some scattered and not very original reflections about the essence of desire. Unfortunately, Wells wrote much less movingly about his yearnings for love than about his yearnings for death. (His literary treatment of sex and romance had always been notoriously clumsy, and had earlier earned him some merciless ribbing from, among others, Rebecca West.) It is remarkable how little, really, the sexual chronicles of this reflective man rise above the personal to regard passion dispassionately. One comes away from them with a deep sense of muddle; and because Wells proves so unsuccessful in his attempt to go beyond the self's "particular story," he inevitably comes across as smug and exhibitionistic—which returns us to the question of Wells's "inverted arrogance."

What is one to make, in the end, of Wells's eagerly modest pronouncements? Can we take them at face value? Would it be unfair to see in the boundless ambition of his books, and in the wayward and gargantuan passions of his life, an underlying arro-

gance? On the one hand, Wells possessed a largeness of vision, a view of innate human frailty in the face of the universe, which seems to have served as a constant check on his egotism; all human beings in the twentieth century are, he wrote in his autobiography, “like early amphibians . . . struggling out of the waters that have hitherto covered our kind.” On the other hand, Wells came away with a different self-image when he examined himself in relation to his countrymen, whose thinking always struck him as depressingly “narrow.” Wells commonly moved among the most successful people of his age, and to find that their perspectives, too, were narrow—these “uneducated” authors and “blind” political leaders—touched him with a bit of gloating pride.

Wells had good reason to feel proud of his vision. His prophetic powers were often astonishing. When he trained his eye on warfare, he was able to predict the coming of the armored tank, the revolutionary effects of armed aircraft, and, in 1914, a device of “continuous explosives” that he named the “atom bomb.” When he turned his imagination to a world in peace, he foresaw space travel, the supplanting of the book by devices analogous to video cassettes, moving sidewalks, and totalitarian censorship of the news through what he called “Babble Machines.” And when one discovers that Wells in 1924 was writing about the need to pre-

serve the whale, one hardly knows whether to feel primarily respect for his prescience or despair at the way in which his wisdom has been ignored.

And yet for all of Wells’s foresight, and all of his insight, that “inevitable” world-state at the core of his vision seemed to grow more unlikely with time—and seems today to grow still more unlikely, as governments continue to fragment and the number of nations to multiply. Wells’s faith in the power of rationalism looks more naïve each year. His utopianism was grounded in a conviction that there was not only one single, irreducible Truth in regard to the issues which human beings have always argued most passionately about—religion, ethics, history, sex, property—but that it could in time be discerned by everyone. In the end, one comes away from his books with a feeling that in his sweeping, magnificent way H. G. Wells often led himself wildly astray. This grandly didactic man appears unwittingly to have presented us with a life that might serve as a cautionary tale. If even Wells, with all his visionary power, could end up so wrong about the future, what chance do we have today of comprehending where we are headed? Although Wells could not resist occasional boasting, the books he left behind ironically convey another sort of message: they would ask us to be humble.

Art & architecture at the Equitable Center

by Roger Kimball

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*

Few corporate ventures in the arts have garnered more public notice than the Equitable Life Assurance Society's recent investment in art and architecture for its new corporate headquarters in New York. It was only to be expected, of course, that a project bringing together so many stellar figures from the arts—Edward Larrabee Barnes, Roy Lichtenstein, Sol LeWitt, Thomas Hart Benton, and Scott Burton, among many others—would attract considerable attention. If you invest in celebrated names, their currency and built-in publicity value is part of what you pay for. And the folks at the Equitable made no pretense of doing anything else when they set out to create—as one of their publications put it—an “unprecedented” blend of “outstanding contemporary fine art and upscale commerce.”

It seems that hardly anything “upscale” can proceed without poaching a bit on the prestige of art these days, and it helps to bear this in mind when attempting to understand the Equitable's conspicuous entry into the art world. Naturally, the company's two-

hundred-million-dollar building must be seen first of all as a major real-estate investment. And though one hears the word “art” intoned repeatedly at the Equitable, what echoes throughout its halls and lobbies, throughout its art-laden executive dining rooms and exclusive restaurants, is not art but money. Art at the Equitable is at bottom a kind of decoration, a fringe benefit, an “extra” fitted to the structure in the hope of commanding higher prices.

This crucial fact was set forth with admirable clarity by Benjamin D. Holloway, chairman and chief executive officer of the recently formed Equitable Real Estate Group, Inc., a twenty-two-billion-dollar division of the Equitable. In an article that appeared last October in *Art & Auction*, Mr. Holloway—who is widely regarded as the entrepreneurial genius behind the Equitable's coupling of art and real estate—assured us that he would like to think that the Equitable's art program was undertaken “foremost for love of art”; at the same time, though, he candidly noted that its investment in art was also “a way of attracting the kind of tenant we want, at the rental prices we are asking.” In this sense, the Equitable's arts program must be considered primarily a part of what Mr. Holloway described elsewhere as the company's search for “new, varied and exciting ways to beautify the bottom line.” The situation was perfectly summed up by the subtitle to the article in *Art & Auction*: “Art, the handmaiden to real estate.”

Once the place of real-estate investment in the Equitable's venture is acknowledged, its relation to art comes into sharper focus. Since attracting affluent tenants was the chief objective, there was never any doubt that the art to be used as bait would have to be drawn from the ranks of celebrated and fashionable artistic reputations. And in this regard, one can only commend the Equitable on the instinct that led it to enlist the curatorial advice and even the physical presence of the Whitney Museum of American Art for its new headquarters. (Mr. Holloway, incidentally, was recently named to the board of the Whitney.) For if one wishes to traffic in the artistically *au courant* without being distracted by questions of aesthetic substance, one can hardly do better than to entrust oneself to the taste and judgment of the Whitney.

And it must also be acknowledged that, though the Equitable is new to the world of corporate art patronage, it has acquitted itself handsomely of at least one traditional office of the patron: it has disposed of dazzling sums of money in the most expeditious manner possible. Having once embarked on its arts program, it quickly acquired dozens of paintings and drawings—including some very good ones—by artists of the stature of Milton Avery, William Bailey, Marsden Hartley, Alex Katz, and Fairfield Porter for display in its executive dining rooms. It provided commissions to Sandro Chia for a four-part mural for the bar of a new restaurant in the complex, and to Brad Davis for three large paintings for its main company dining room. Amidst a barrage of publicity, the Equitable also commissioned several works for its public spaces, including a sixty-eight by thirty-two-foot mural from the Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, sculpture from the British artist Barry Flanagan, large-scale "wall drawings" from the Minimalist sculptor Sol LeWitt, and specially designed furnishings and decorations from the furniture designer and "sculptor" Scott Burton. Additional publicity attended its single largest expenditure for art: the purchase of Thomas Hart Benton's

America Today, a ten-panel mural sequence that the regionalist painter undertook for The New School for Social Research in the early Thirties. The Equitable acquired the Benton murals from the New York art dealer Christophe Janet for nearly three and a half million dollars, plus cleaning and restoration costs. In a matter of months, the insurance company spent some seven and a half million dollars to adorn its public halls, lobbies, courtyards, restaurants, and its executive dining rooms with works of art.

Nor did the Equitable's adventures with art stop there. It also provided the Whitney with two galleries on the ground floor of its new tower, and agreed to underwrite the museum's installation and operating expenses for these exhibition facilities. Flanking the new building's monumental entrance lobby on Seventh Avenue, the two three-thousand-square-foot galleries constitute the largest of the Whitney's four "branch museums." The south gallery is scheduled to mount five or six exhibitions a year, drawn largely from outside collections, while the north gallery will be used for long-term exhibitions of items from the Whitney's permanent collection.

It is worth noting that until recently the Equitable has not been known for taking a keen interest in the arts. But with the construction of its new headquarters, the nation's third largest life insurance company, managing assets of some seventy-seven billion dollars, instantly established itself as a prominent force in the world of corporate patronage. Building a new headquarters afforded the perfect opportunity to refurbish its corporate image. Looking, no doubt, to Mobil's experience with *Masterpiece Theater*, to Exxon's and Philip Morris's sponsorship of various "blockbuster" art exhibitions, to IBM's success with the discreet art gallery in the basement of its New York headquarters, the Equitable shrewdly concluded that there is no surer way to broadcast an image of beneficent high-mindedness and chic taste than to involve itself conspicuously in the arts.

Equitable officials like to stress that their

contribution to the public weal is not confined to the particular works of art they have assembled. Comparing their new headquarters to Rockefeller Center, they point to the lavish arrangement of public spaces and amenities that the construction of the new building has made possible. The tower itself is a fifty-four-story, three-tiered structure of polished brownish-pink granite, glass, and limestone, featuring gigantic "Romanesque" arches at its base and crown. It is linked by an eight-hundred-foot corridor and galleria to the old Equitable building at 1285 Sixth Avenue, which was renovated as part of the project. Though still owned by the Equitable, the 1960 aluminum and glass tower, designed by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, has been rechristened The PaineWebber Building in recognition of the brokerage firm's tenancy there.

Together, the block-long *mélange* is known as the Equitable Center and Arts Complex: "one square block of art," as an Equitable publication proudly proclaims. Standing on Seventh Avenue between Fifty-first and Fifty-second Streets in midtown Manhattan, the Equitable Center comprises over three million square feet of office space, museum and corporate art galleries, specially commissioned sculpture, murals, and other art installations, retail stores, urban plazas, and two restaurants (a third is planned). A private health club and a five-hundred-seat theater are under construction. Whatever else it may be, the Equitable Center, as a company press release cheerfully claimed, is certainly "one of the largest corporate art complexes ever developed."

Yet if there is no doubt about the scale of the Equitable's ambitious undertaking, what is very much at issue is the aesthetic substance of the endeavor. The Equitable has attempted to provide us with a landmark curiosity that, like Rockefeller Center, succeeds as a public attraction and as a real-estate development. And it may readily be granted that, as one reviewer observed, "the artists involved in the commissions couldn't be happier." But what, if anything, does this

collection of incidental amenities and fashionable artistic reputations have to do with the life of art? This is the question that returns again and again when one contemplates the Equitable Center, and to answer it we must look more carefully at this effort to produce what has been described as "a monumental artistic environment."

The first thing to be reckoned with in the Equitable's scheme is the architecture. It probably came as a surprise to others, as it did to me, that the architect for the new Equitable building was Edward Larrabee Barnes. Mr. Barnes is a distinguished urban architect who has shown himself capable of designing buildings of considerable grace and integrity. Indeed, his best buildings in New York—the IBM headquarters on Madison Avenue at Fifty-seventh Street and the newly completed office tower at 599 Lexington Avenue, directly across from the Citicorp Center—are excellent examples of contemporary skyscraper design. Both are straightforward and elegant productions, rigorous without being austere. Above all, they completely eschew the historicizing, postmodernist frippery that has bewitched so much recent architecture.

Not all of Mr. Barnes's New York buildings are of this caliber, however. His recently completed office building at Madison Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street, for example, impresses one mostly as a cruder, clumsier version of the building at 599 Lexington Avenue. And Mr. Barnes's Asia Society building on Park Avenue at Seventieth Street is now generally acknowledged to be a failure. But the imperfections of these buildings pale into insignificance when set beside the new Equitable tower. For here Mr. Barnes seems to have abandoned any attempt at a cogent architectural design. Instead, he has contrived to produce one of the most pretentious and ungainly new buildings in New York. The proportioning of the building is both stodgy and enervated. The large, clunky base waddles out toward Seventh Avenue, while the tower rises in weary shrugs to its cookie-cutter top. Mr. Barnes's abundant use of granite and lime-

stone panels on the façade was no doubt intended to lend the building an air of gracious solidity. The effect, however, is quite the opposite: the entire skin of the building seems cheap, temporary, replaceable, as if a new, more fashionable façade might be stuck on at a moment's notice.

Similarly, the hypertrophied arches at base and crown were obviously intended to create an impression of monumental grandeur, but they seem more like movie-set novelties. Inside, the huge, boxy atrium—five stories of anonymous emptiness—feels like nothing so much as an abandoned railway station. Even considered for what it is, an essay in postmodernism, the building is lackluster and without vitality—diffident in the midst of its ineffectual blustering. And given the record of Mr. Barnes's accomplishments, one cannot help wondering whether he was working against his better instincts here, and whether the Equitable building is at least partially the result of his acquiescence in the client's desire for chic, grandiose gestures and eye-catching effects.

In this context, it is worth questioning the extent to which the Equitable Center can legitimately be compared to Rockefeller Center. Clearly, the spokesmen at the Equitable are eager to establish the comparison. The notion that the Equitable Center is the successor to Rockefeller Center runs like a leitmotif through the Equitable's literature on itself and—like so much about the venture—seems to have been taken over unscrutinized by the press. No connection is too tenuous to put forward. Hence: the Equitable recently acquired Paulanship's 1938 bronze sculpture *Day*; Rockefeller Center has Manship's *Prometheus* on prominent display; *ergo*, Manship's sculpture is (as a *New York Times* article put it) "one of the links between the building and Rockefeller Center." The logic is totemistic: by acquiring the property of an ancestor, or even simply something that reminds one of him, one somehow also acquires his reality and strength.

The argument is specious, of course. But the Equitable's acquisition of Manship's

sculpture does illustrate a signal principle at work throughout its venture into the arts: the blind attachment to current reputations. For it happens that Manship, whose popularity waned after his success in the Thirties, is now enjoying a considerable renaissance, riding on the same crest of sentiment that is carrying regionalist artists like Thomas Hart Benton to their current prominence. The fact that Manship's sculpture is decidedly second-rate is apparently of no concern at all. What matters is his popularity, his name in the art world; that alone makes him an attractive property to the Equitable. And if he can be used to suggest some deeper continuity with Rockefeller Center, so much the better.

The Equitable has asserted its kinship with Rockefeller Center in other ways as well. Sometimes it is said that the Equitable Center is an "extension" of Rockefeller Center because the two communicate via an underground corridor. Alternatively, it is suggested that the Equitable Center, stocked with commissioned art and public amenities, is to the Eighties what Rockefeller Center was to the Thirties. But neither version of their kinship will wash. The Equitable Center is no more a real "extension" of Rockefeller Center than the Bronx is an extension of the Battery, although both are "linked" by tunnel. Nor can it be said that the Equitable Center is an updated version of Rockefeller Center, even if it has in some sense been inspired by it. Rockefeller Center was a pioneering triumph of urban design, an unprecedented and sensitively executed network of buildings, shops, plazas, and public attractions that transformed an entire neighborhood. Lacking any original vision, the Equitable Center is less a successor than a parody of Rockefeller Center.

Indeed, the notion of parody may be the real key to understanding the Equitable Center. What we see throughout the Equitable is a kind of parody of conventional "good taste," an exaggerated, overblown conventionality that spoofs even as it imitates traditional forms of bourgeois elegance.

This is nowhere more evident than in the contribution made by Kohn, Pedersen, Fox, Conway in designing the Equitable's offices, hallways, executive dining rooms, and boardroom. This firm of architects and interior designers has quickly achieved a prominent reputation over the last four or five years by producing postmodernist interiors that have all the schmaltzy, theatrical feel of opulent stage sets. They went all out for the Equitable, and the result is spaces festooned with the pseudo-classical mouldings, larger-than-life woodwork, and other decorative appointments in which the firm specializes. One gathers that the effect was meant to be stately. It manages instead to seem merely expensive—custom-made carpets whose diamond pattern is said to derive from Palladio, etc. The result is a style perhaps best described as Hollywood Biedermeier. But it's really a hybrid of anomalous styles, an almost antiseptic exercise in architectural sentimentality—a concoction that is now the stock-in-trade of Kohn, Pedersen, Fox, Conway.

The *ne plus ultra* of this sensibility is the boardroom on the fiftieth floor of the tower. Or perhaps one should say the fiftieth floor and then some. Through its fifty-three-foot arch window, the oversized room commands a stunning view west over the Hudson River. A gigantic circular table—an apparently seamless, exquisitely crafted mahogany doughnut—sits on a plush, intensely green carpet. An impressive array of audio-visual controls are secreted against the wall in a large wood-and-glass booth that seems at first like an old-fashioned trophy case. The room is a study in bureaucratic bombast, possibly the one instance of American interior design that might have caused some embarrassment to Albert Speer. It would be almost funny, except that such a shameless appeal to power cannot but seem a little sinister; one could hardly imagine a more perfect setting for a contemporary Star Chamber. As one observer remarked, the absurdly grandiose circular table, focused unrelentingly on the inescapable green circle inside, gives a whole new significance to the idea of being “called on the carpet.”

Directly across from the boardroom is the company's main dining room, which boasts a second large arch window facing east. Brad Davis's *Triptych*, a series of three eminently forgettable Neo-Expressionist landscapes, is hastened into oblivion by the distracting activity of the room and the light flooding in from the huge arch window. Down on the forty-ninth floor there are a dozen or so executive dining rooms. (These are available for lunch by appointment to anyone on the Equitable executive staff, as well as to certain outside groups. Tours of the art are also available to the public by special appointment.) Got up by Kohn, Pedersen, *et alia*, in the best inflated *haut bourgeois* taste, each is named for the artist whose work is displayed in the room: Lee Krasner, Marsden Hartley, Alice Neel, and others.

Now, there are some very fine art works in what one is tempted to call the Equitable's “dinner collection”; there is a wonderful seascape by Milton Avery, for example, an accomplished still life by Hartley, and some extremely droll portraits by Guy Pène du Bois. The Equitable's collection also includes excellent paintings by Fairfield Porter—his *Interior* and *The Forsythia Hedge* come immediately to mind. And there is no reason to doubt that the artworks here and throughout the Equitable's collection are as scrupulously tended and cared for as the Equitable spokesmen claim. But, distributed like bric-a-brac throughout these dining rooms and hallways, the paintings have no more aesthetic presence than wallpaper. The arrangement has achieved the visual equivalent of Muzak—often high-quality Muzak, it is true (what Equitable officials refer to proudly as “museum quality work”), but Muzak all the same: deliberately innocuous background “noise” meant to distract one from the concentration and receptiveness that any real aesthetic experience requires. The point is that the paintings are *meant* to be decoration; they are meant to be glimpsed—not seen, really—for an hour or two a day at most by a handful of busy executives who come to the dining rooms to conduct their business.

In effect, the paintings and drawings in the Equitable's executive dining rooms are being held hostage. It is practically impossible for the viewer to wrest them from the merely decorative function they have been assigned, and one leaves convinced that it is only when they travel to other exhibitions that the Equitable's artworks will have the chance to be *seen* and experienced. This is in fact true of the art throughout the building, but it is especially the case in the dining rooms, where the art tends to be superior in quality to the "public" art downstairs, and where the conference-room atmosphere in the dining rooms is so obviously inimical to the contemplation of art.

To speak of environments inimical to the contemplation of art brings one naturally to consider the place of the Whitney Museum of American Art at the Equitable Center. It is one of the many ironies of this whole endeavor that the Equitable and the Whitney were brought together by Mr. Barnes. Mr. Barnes, one recalls, is on record as opposing Michael Graves's proposed addition to the main branch of the Whitney Museum. For many—including, one had supposed, Mr. Barnes himself—the Whitney's embrace of Mr. Graves's proposal to transform Marcel Breuer's somber modernist building into a postmodernist birthday cake caused immense dismay. Perhaps more than any of the museum's recent activities—more even than its artistically vacuous biennial exhibitions of contemporary art—this proposal precipitated a crisis of confidence in the Whitney's artistic aims. Yet in 1983, when plans for the Equitable's public art were taking shape, Mr. Barnes suggested that the Whitney be involved in the project, and one can only assume that he has continued to support its participation at the Equitable Center ever since.

What are we to make of Mr. Barnes's endorsement of the Whitney as, in effect, the guiding aesthetic spirit for the Equitable Center? He has picturesquely described their relationship as "symbiotic"—which is fair enough, I suppose, though a kind of

reciprocal parasitism might describe the union more accurately. What the Whitney gets, quite simply, is financial assistance and more space to exhibit its art. What the Equitable gets is the prestige of American art without the nuisance of having to bother about aesthetic quality: the Whitney is only too happy to certify the prestige of the artists it shows and the artists it recommends to the Equitable, and prestige, of course—reputations whose stock at the moment is high in the art world—is precisely what the Equitable is after.

Between the Whitney's twin galleries and the not-for-profit artsy boutiques immediately adjacent to the galleries the difference is not large—either in tone or, for the most part, in the aesthetic quality of the objects displayed. Certainly, the public brings about as much aesthetic attention to the Whitney's galleries as it brings to the "Scriptorium" or the "Treasury"—as the boutiques are pretentiously called—where one can search for a greeting card or a Mary Cassatt appointment book or an "authentic" reproduction of some folk-art necklace. Indeed, perhaps the chief difference between the boutiques and the museum galleries is that in one the items on display are for sale while in the other one is sold only the proverbial bill of goods.

Nor is the Whitney's role at the Equitable confined to the galleries. In addition to establishing the largest of its branches in the new building, the Whitney has also provided the Equitable with expert advice on some of its public commissions. Not surprisingly, its exercise of "expertise" for the Equitable has consisted not in making aesthetic discriminations but in ratifying artistic reputations. It is to the Whitney's "expertise," for example, that we owe the choice of Roy Lichtenstein and Scott Burton as the artists to decorate the atrium.

When Mr. Lichtenstein began to paint his sixty-eight-foot-tall *Mural with Blue Brushstroke* last November, an Equitable press release quoted John Carter, president and chief executive officer of the Equitable, expressing his pride in having "one of

America's foremost artists"—he meant Mr. Lichtenstein—"paint a truly epic work for permanent display in our headquarters building." Mr. Lichtenstein then thanked the Equitable for "providing me the opportunity to create a work on such a grand scale." Much has been made of the size of the works of public art at the Equitable, especially of Mr. Lichtenstein's mural; as every notice of the work has pointed out, it is "the artist's largest work"; perhaps, as *The New York Times* suggested, it is even "one of the nation's largest works of public art." If size is a virtue, it is the only one that we can unhesitatingly attribute to *Mural with Blue Brushstroke*.

Even so, *Mural with Blue Brushstroke*, as large as it is, cannot effectively compete with the Equitable's cavernous atrium. Whether because of the aggressively inhospitable space or because of its own lack of aesthetic force, the work impresses one less as a painting than as a species of garish holiday bunting. Billed also as "a compendium of the artist's signature images and a grand summation of his career," it is in fact little more than an enormous, brightly colored cartoon. And in truth, Mr. Lichtenstein's works have always had the aura of clever camp about them, engaging one's interest not for their artistic accomplishment but for their brashness, their punning play on what are essentially media images. In the end, he is less an artist than a pictorial gagster who has raided comic books and the gestures of modern art for his jokes. To call this *Mural* an "epic work" only compounds an already grotesque joke.

While Scott Burton's contributions to the Equitable are less spectacular in scale than Mr. Lichtenstein's, their aesthetic quality is equally dim. *Atrium Furnishment*, Mr. Burton's major contribution here, consists of a large, semi-circular green marble settee, a circular marble table with a variety of aquatic plants set in a basin in the center of the table, and, across from the settee, a bank of some dozen tropical conifers. Mr. Burton also designed triangular planters and granite tables and seats for two outdoor plazas. In

an article on his work that appeared in *The New York Times*, Mr. Burton is quoted as saying: "I don't feel the need to establish it as art, as much as I feel the need to establish it as furniture"—a sentiment that one must applaud, really, because while none of Mr. Burton's work at the Equitable is either very good or very bad when considered as plaza furniture or as decoration, it simply does not exist as art.

The inhospitableness of the Equitable's atrium does much to belie the claim that its new headquarters provide New York with an attractive and truly public gathering place. Unlike the atrium at Mr. Barnes's IBM building, say, the Equitable's atrium is a thoroughly unamiable space. People do not congregate, do not linger, do not come to talk and relax there as they do at the IBM atrium. Nor could they. Mr. Burton's uncomfortable *Atrium Furnishment*, exposed in the very center of the gaping atrium, is the only place to sit in the entire space. And one cannot help pointing out that Mr. Burton could learn something about the decorative use of trees and the practical use of furniture *as furniture* from IBM's less fussy, more hospitable amenity. It turns out that the Equitable *has* copied Rockefeller Center in what is perhaps its least appealing respect; neither really provides the public with a place for civilized loitering indoors, despite publicity to the contrary.

While Messrs. Lichtenstein and Burton's contributions to the Equitable can be taken as a perfect illustration of the kind of "expertise" one has come to expect from the Whitney these days, the Equitable has shown itself eminently capable of exercising its own brand of "expertise." Consider its most publicized acquisition: Thomas Hart Benton's *America Today* mural cycle. There has been a great deal of flummery written about these murals since their purchase and display by the Equitable. Finally, though, they remain what they always have been: a sentimentalized, somewhat crudely executed panorama of American life *circa* 1930. Ironically, some of the most insightful comments about them came from Benton him-

self. After the Equitable purchased the murals, it sponsored the publication of a glossy monograph, replete with full-color photographs, on the work. In an epigraph to the booklet, dated 1931, Benton remarks of *America Today*: "I don't know whether it's art or not and I don't care. What I wanted to show was the energy and rush and confusion of American Life." Later, in 1968, he summed up his attitude toward the work with the observation that "If it's not art, it's at least history." Both comments are perfectly true, as far as they go, yet one can't help pointing out that nearly three and a half million dollars is a poor bargain for a bit of pre-packaged Americana.

The fact is, of course, that the overwhelming majority of people passing through the Equitable have no specialized knowledge of or particular interest in art: they are people who work in the building, tourists, passers-by. One needs to spend only a few minutes sitting in the atrium to be convinced that many, perhaps most, of those who come to look at the art are as taken with the artsy paraphernalia they find in the atrium boutiques as they are with anything in the Whitney galleries or on the atrium walls. In this they may be showing astute judgment. Nevertheless, the thought that works like those of Messrs. Lichtenstein and Burton are held up to the public as examples of great art is a travesty. None of the art commissioned by the Equitable is of the first or even the second rank. Here again the press has been the Equitable's willing accomplice, helping to man the bellows that keeps these reputations afloat. In *The New York Times*, for example, we are assured that "Every one of the large-scale commissions in the new building—by Scott Burton, Sandro Chia, Sol LeWitt and Roy Lichtenstein—is ambitious and worthy of serious attention."

The thing to appreciate about the entire arts program at the Equitable is that it is concerned first and foremost with the prestige of art, not with its aesthetic substance. The Whitney's imprimatur practically guarantees this, and the Equitable is not having it any other way. Messrs. Lichtenstein,

LeWitt, Burton, Benton, and the others were clearly chosen because of the place they currently occupy in the professional art establishment. Ten years ago, when American regionalist painting was out of fashion in the art world, the Equitable would not have touched paintings by Thomas Hart Benton. Now, of course, things have changed. The winds of fashion have shifted in Benton's direction.

This attention to fashion is crucial for the Equitable, because fashionableness constitutes its sole touchstone of aesthetic value. Think of the confusion that would ensue in an art world so awash with names and reputations if one were charged with choosing artists not on the basis of their current "market value" but on the basis of their aesthetic worth! The problem is, of course, that these reputations will change; they will soon fade and be replaced by other, equally ephemeral, equally insubstantial, reputations. And then, one may safely wager, the trustees of the Equitable's art program will in their wisdom find themselves compelled to replace the works of art they have so enthusiastically touted. It must be some consolation to know that they can always unload their "outmoded" works on the Whitney. Newer, more recognizable, more *au courant* names will be offered to the public until these, too, fail to provide the expected return in prestige and are replaced in turn.

The whole idea of an "expected return" brings us back to the real purpose of the Equitable Center: real-estate development. As a real-estate venture, the Equitable's new building must be considered something of a risk. It intrudes upon a dilapidated section of town whose sidewalks are still not free from the sordid influences of Times Square a few blocks south. Rents for premium office space in modern buildings in the area are reportedly hovering around thirty dollars per square foot. But the Equitable is counting on its panoply of art and other amenities to fetch the forty or fifty dollars per square foot or more it is asking in the new building. A headline in the real estate section of *The*

New York Times summed it up with cool accuracy: "Equitable Seeking Park Avenue Rents On Seventh Avenue."

Equitable spokesmen tend to grow uncomfortable when it is suggested that their arts program was undertaken primarily for commercial or promotional purposes. And rarely since Mr. Holloway's statements in that article in *Art & Auction* have they put their position quite so baldly. Having contrived to supply the neighborhood with so much "upscale" commerce and art, they seem bemused that anyone should begrudge them the monetary fruits of their efforts. There is certainly nothing wrong with real-estate development. And as far as improving the neighborhood goes, it will be readily admitted at least that real-estate values in the area are likely to rise. But what about the experience of art? The truth is that art is merely the means to an end at the Equitable. And one should be under no illusion that its "commitment" to art would survive if in the future other means proved better adapted to

the goal of "beautifying the bottom line." At the moment, the Equitable's investment in art is probably a good gamble. The vicarious experience of art is in great demand and seems to be able to boost all manner of enterprises.

Still, for anyone concerned with the life of art, the Equitable Center cannot be anything but a melancholy and bewildering spectacle—melancholy because of the blatantly cynical uses to which art is put, bewildering because nothing at the Equitable is what it appears to be. We are presented with an arts center that is not really an arts center, masterpieces that are not masterpieces, architecture that is based on a phony appropriation of historical forms. As an experience of art, the whole thing is unreal, and leaves one with an impression not unlike that described by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*. Like Alice, one finds oneself in the midst of a crowded curiosity shop that, on closer inspection, turns out to be as empty and insubstantial as a dream.

The mystery of Theodore Dreiser

by Joseph Epstein

“‘Hm,’ he half groaned, clearing his throat. ‘Gee!’”

I begin by borrowing a line from Theodore Dreiser, the master himself, before setting out to consider the first of many issues that Dreiser’s extraordinary career poses—that of the relationship of style to art. It was his friend and early champion H. L. Mencken who once remarked that Dreiser had “an incurable antipathy to the *mot juste*,” but that ain’t the half of it. Theodore Dreiser also had an aluminum ear (one down from tin), an unfailing penchant for the purple, an oafish wit, and the literary tact and lightness of touch of a rhinoceros. Who but Dreiser, in *Sister Carrie*, could cap a brief description of workers returning home on a winter’s night in Chicago by saying that the crowd was “a spectacle of warm-blooded humanity”? Only Dreiser, in *An American Tragedy*, had the innate klutziness to write, “The death house of this particular prison was one of those crass erections and maintenances of human insensibility and stupidity for which no one was primarily responsible.” No one except Dreiser, in *The “Genius,”* could roll off this squib of dialogue: “‘Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!’ laughed Suzanne.” For the gracious descriptive touch, there is this from *The Bulwark*: “Most of them were becomingly gowned in long frocks of every hue.” By now readers who have not read Dreiser and for whom style in literature is decisive are likely to join in the sentiment of Eugene Witla, the autobiographical hero of *The*

“Genius”: “‘Nothing doing,’ he exclaimed, in the slang of the day.” But I would caution them, before giving up on Dreiser, with a line of snappy dialogue from *Jennie Gerhardt*: “‘Aw, you hush up,’ was her displeased rejoinder.”

But then it is a good deal easier to make fun of Theodore Dreiser’s prose style than it is to account for his genius. A genius he was, of that there ought not to be any serious doubt. He may not always have been able to write a careful sentence or a well-shaped paragraph, but this did not stand in the way of his turning out powerful novels. To put my cards on the table early in the game, let me say that Theodore Dreiser, in my opinion, is America’s greatest novelist. Herman Melville may have written the greatest single American novel, Henry James plumped deeper into the subtleties of human motivation, Mark Twain written more lyrically about this country, but Theodore Dreiser, that clod, bumbler, yokel, creep, wrote the novels that tell more in the way of elemental truth about American life and character, and tell it in a consistently persuasive and powerful manner, than those of any other American writer before or since his time.

While scarcely a courageously lonely opinion, neither is this one on which there is anything like a clear consensus. Dissenting opinions on Theodore Dreiser have never been in short supply. Robert Benchley wrote a hilarious parody of Dreiser in which he skewered the tautological stiffness of his

prose while underscoring his propensity for stuffing his novels with density of detail. (“(NOTE TO PRINTER: Attached find copy of *Thurston’s Street Guide*. Print names of every street listed therein, beginning with East Division and up to, and including, Dawson.)”) Stuart P. Sherman lambasted Dreiser in a 1915 essay in *The Nation*, “The Barbaric Naturalism of Theodore Dreiser,” a title that speaks for itself, though Sherman was later to reverse his opinion when he wrote, in 1925, in praise of *An American Tragedy*. Dreiser has never been among the favorite authors of those for whom aesthetic considerations dominate all others. Even Mencken, who helped Dreiser through the censorship wars waged over his early novels and who knew Dreiser’s literary worth perhaps as well as any man, was appalled by Dreiser’s stylistic horrors. “I often wonder,” Mencken once wrote, “if Dreiser gets anything properly describable as pleasure out of [his] dogged accumulation of threadbare, undistinguished, uninspiring nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, pronouns, participles and conjunctions.” It was Mencken, too, who called Dreiser “a wholesaler of words.”

But a stronger dissent, one based only partly on style, was written by Lionel Trilling in “Dreiser and the Liberal Mind,” perhaps the most passionately angry essay that Trilling, not a man famously given to displaying anger in his prose, ever allowed himself.¹ The year of Trilling’s essay is 1946, and the date is important, for, along with Dreiser, there were other targets of attack in this essay. One was the liberal (and Communist and fellow-travelling) critics who failed properly to appreciate Henry James while doing their utmost to elevate Theodore Dreiser. Trilling’s resentment over this is real and reasonable. Among liberal critics James was demoted for his delicacy,

his gentility, his powerful subtlety of mind, while what was openly spoken of as Dreiser’s low origins, his commonness, and crudity were viewed by these same critics as sources of strength that issued in Dreiser’s greater grip on what was taken to be American reality. For these critics, Dreiser’s anti-Semitism was set aside and his support of the American Communist Party was genially understood, in the words of his early biographer Robert Elias, as “a means for establishing his cherished goal of greater equality among men.” Trilling rightly argues that when Dreiser attempts to be philosophical “he is likely to be not only foolish but vulgar.” He demonstrates that Dreiser, far from being a master of colloquial speech and idiom, as his supporters maintained, can be awkwardly, even hideously, bookish. Finally, taking Dreiser’s novel *The Bulwark* for his text, Trilling shows the inconsistency of Dreiser in the “comfortable untroubled way in which [he] moved from nihilism to pietism.”

What Trilling writes about Dreiser is by and large true; and yet, somehow, it is not nearly the whole truth. Time has eroded some of the cogency of Trilling’s essay. Now, forty years after Trilling wrote “Dreiser and the Liberal Mind,” Henry James, owing to the admirable efforts of Jacques Barzun, Lionel Trilling, and others, has been thoroughly accepted, even enshrined, in the canon of American literature, while Dreiser’s own position, though hardly an obscure one, is far from being the commanding position it once was. Critics of our day tend not so much to overlook his faults as to overlook him generally. Marxist critics may still find much in Dreiser’s novels on which to festoon their clichés about the class struggle and alienation under capitalism. Dreiser is still often taught in undergraduate survey courses under the dreary rubric of “Realism and Naturalism.” But fashionable Dreiser is not. One cannot readily imagine the flashier contemporary critics deconstructing, semiologizing, trope-a-doping, or otherwise making a critical hash of his bulky books. Nor does the opposition

1 “Dreiser and the Liberal Mind” was first published in *The Nation* on April 20, 1946. It was revised for publication in Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* (Viking, 1950), where it appeared together with a discussion of V.L. Parrington under the title “Reality in America.”

between James and Dreiser—the dichotomy of palefaces and *schleppers*, perhaps—any longer seem productive. One does not, after all, have to choose between them. James is caviar, Dreiser a good boiled potato; one cannot live exclusively on caviar, and there is nothing wrong with a good boiled potato.

Dreiser's contemporary position outside fashion and beyond academic dispute is not an altogether bad place for a writer to be. It leaves his novels the property of those readers who understand novels to be instruments for investigating the connection between character and destiny, and novelists to be investigators on a quest for—I blush to introduce such an old-fashioned word—truth. Although so far as I know Dreiser wrote nothing of sustained theoretical interest on the role of the novelist, his own novels, when they do not spin out of control into philosophical or egocentric divagations, are precisely about the connection between character and destiny. It is this connection, of course, that provides the main line, the great tradition, of the novel—the tradition of Stendhal, Balzac, George Eliot, Dickens, Tolstoy, Hardy, Conrad, and Henry James.

After one has said all that there is to be said against Dreiser, there remain his best novels—especially *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, *An American Tragedy*, and vast stretches of *The Financier* and *The Titan*—to confront. (If there is a central weakness in Lionel Trilling's essay, it is his failure to confront Dreiser at his best.) How to confront them is no easy matter. I have done so, on occasion, as a university teacher, teaching them to freshmen students, but never, I have felt, anywhere near successfully. At the close of two or three ninety-minute sessions, so much remains unsaid, so much remains unexplored. As a teacher, I invariably feel that I have not encompassed these novels, have not arrived at their true center or conveyed a comprehensive understanding of the serious business that is being conducted in them. Sad to admit, but a sign of great literature may be that it cannot be altogether successfully taught. Confronted with mas-

terworks, pedagogy does not stand mute—never mute—but awkwardly inept.

The best students react well to the novels of Dreiser. They sense that there are big things going on in his pages. And even the very best students have the advantage that, at eighteen, they have very little sense of prose style, and hence no snobbery about it. I am not arguing for the superior wisdom of the young, but rather that the shallow sophistication of the not-so-young can present its own obstacles. Saul Bellow, who has long written and spoken admiringly of Dreiser's novels, puts the point best: "I often think the criticism of Dreiser as a stylist at times betrays a resistance to the feelings he causes readers to suffer. If they say he can't write, they need not experience these feelings."

What are these feelings? I should say that any comprehensive list of them would include humiliation and fear of failure, the craving for respectability, every kind of longing, and the desolation that accompanies an unutterable loneliness in the face of a (probably) uncaring universe. In teaching Dreiser I have always wanted to begin—perhaps some day I shall begin—by saying, "What you must understand about Theodore Dreiser is that he was born poor and homely and raised in ignorance and filled with desire. Write that down and remember it. Now get out of here and go home and read the book again."

How did Dreiser manage to convey such strong feelings in his novels? Certainly not through style. He did it, quite despite style, through the creation of character. All his chief characters—Carrie and Jennie, Clyde and Eugene, Hurstwood and Cowperwood—were of course drawn out of the deep well of his own complex personality, his humiliation and fear and yearning, his lust and loneliness and craving for power. I write "of course," but "of course" doesn't reveal the mystery of how he was able to do it. This Hoosier hick, with a year of college under his belt, without the rudiments of grammar, with low-grade journalism his only training, at the age of twenty-nine was able to create the character of George Hurstwood, the

most moving portrait in all of literature of the middle-aged man on the way down. *Feinschmeckers* of literature may be put off by Dreiser's describing Hurstwood as the manager of a "truly swell saloon," but I contend that if you cannot sympathize with George Hurstwood's defeat in *Sister Carrie* you are not fit to read novels.

To those of us who care greatly for style in literature, the achievement of Theodore Dreiser is at once an affront and a puzzlement. Dostoevsky, I am told by people who read Russian and who report that his novels have been much "cleaned up" in their English translations, is another writer who worked outside style; and Alexander Solzhenitsyn may be a third. Nor have I ever seen Balzac persuasively praised for his stylistic felicity. Dreiser, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Balzac, fast writers all, producers in bulk, each with a powerful vision and an almost missionary zeal to convey it, seem not so much above style as they seem to make style somewhat beside the point. Style, sedulously cultivated, can issue in literary power, but if the power is there to begin with style becomes a secondary concern at best, what in encyclopedia sales is known as an "add on." How the power got there in the first place is one of those splendid questions without any convincing general answer.

In the particular case of Theodore Dreiser, one searches for an answer, if answer there be, in biography. The biographical literature on Dreiser is far from scant. To begin with, there is Robert Elias's *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature* (1949), written by a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania who knew Dreiser while he was alive and who may be said to have invented Theodore Dreiser as an academic subject. In *Dreiser* (1965), the professional biographer W.A. Swanberg wrote a biography perhaps thin on literary criticism but rich in its clear reporting of the details of Dreiser's long and complicated life. F.O. Matthiessen wrote a volume, *Theodore Dreiser* (1951), in the American Men of Letters Series that suffers

for taking Dreiser's strange politics all too seriously. (Matthiessen's book ends on the following note of left-wing piety: "His will provided that, after Helen's [his wife's] death, whatever little property might be left should go to a home for Negro orphans.") In *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* (1971), Robert Penn Warren produced a slender volume that is a fit appreciation on the centennial of Dreiser's birth of his literary achievement, but that does not dwell on the comic, often mad complexities of the man who wrote the books. Easily the most impressive work of literary scholarship devoted to Dreiser is Ellen Moers's *Two Dreisers* (1969), which masterfully illuminates Dreiser's attempts to learn about modern psychology from the Austrian-born psychoanalyst A.A. Brill and about chemical physiology from Jacques Loeb, the master of the mechanistic theory of life. In doing so, Professor Moers enhanced his stature as a serious artist by removing any notion that Dreiser was merely an odd and interesting primitive. Meanwhile, a slow but steady stream of Dreiser's diaries, unpublished manuscripts, and uncorrupted editions of his novels have been issuing from the University of Pennsylvania Press under the general—and very capable—editorship of Thomas P. Riggio.² The Library of America plans to issue several volumes of Dreiser's work.³ And now we have the first volume of what promises to be a blockbuster biography, *Theodore Dreiser*:

2 The latest volume to be issued by the University of Pennsylvania Press is the forthcoming *Dreiser-Meucken Letters: Correspondence of Theodore Dreiser and H. L. Mencken 1907-1945*, Volumes I and II. Also available are Dreiser's *American Diaries 1902-1926*, edited with an introduction by Thomas P. Riggio; *An Amateur Laborer*, edited with an introduction by Richard W. Dowell, textual editor James L.W. West III, general editor Neda M. Westlake; *Sister Carrie*, edited with an introduction and notes by John C. Berkey, Alice M. Winters, Neda M. Westlake, and James L.W. West III.

3 The first volume, to appear in April, includes *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *Twelve Men*, and is edited by Richard Lehan (1150 pages, \$27.50).

At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907, by Richard Lingeman.⁴

I say a "blockbuster biography" because Mr. Lingeman has taken more than four hundred and seventy pages, including scholarly apparatus, to get his subject up to 1907. (Dreiser's dates are 1871-1945.) Still ahead lie most of the vast quantity of Dreiser's writings, the elaborate confusion of his politics, and the astonishing profligacy and tangled skein of his amours. (Mencken once remarked, with only slight hyperbole, that Dreiser enjoyed the sex life of a chimpanzee.) Although only another single volume is promised, it is difficult to imagine Mr. Lingeman landing this whalish work at fewer than a thousand pages, which would certainly be Dreiserian in bulk if not necessarily in other ways. When a writer has been written about as exhaustively as Theodore Dreiser has, the question of the need for such a book arises. As Igor Stravinsky was wont to say late in life, when presented with some new work that threatened to deflect his attention, "Who needs this?"

A new biography of a much written about artist is worth doing if, apart from wrongful neglect or the emergence of fresh material, something has happened that has made previous ways of telling the subject's life seem outmoded. On the basis of Mr. Lingeman's first volume, it is not clear that any of these conditions obtain. To be sure, there is a greater density of detail in Lingeman's biography than in Swanberg's, but then Lingeman takes more than four hundred pages to bring Dreiser's life to a point that Swanberg covered in one hundred and twenty-five (in a book that runs to 614 pages). Some of this detail is intrinsically interesting—the account of Doubleday's near scuttling of its own edition of *Sister Carrie*, the chronicle of Dreiser's days as a laborer in the vineyards of mass journalism—but Mae West's famous apothegm, "You can't get too much of a good thing," does

not necessarily apply to the writing of biography.

As a literary critic, Lingeman is not inept, but neither does he add anything new to our understanding of Dreiser's work. Next to a real literary sensibility such as the one Ellen Moers brought to her criticism of Dreiser, Lingeman's seems rather pale. Part of the problem is in the prose. Lingeman writes a serviceable journalist's prose, but it often lapses into journalistic archaisms in which people "opine" or "pen" short stories. Sometimes it drops two notches further down into Dreiserian bookish cliché, as when "brightly colored flowers bloomed in lush profusion"; or when Dreiser, under the ministrations of what Mencken once called "non-Euclidian sex," is sent "into paroxysms of groaning delirium"; or, all engines clanging now, "the seeds of [Dreiser's future books] had been planted in the fallow soil of his silent decade, and the storm brought rain and, lo, the earth bore fruit." Hold that tiger.

But the larger question is whether a fresh interpretation of Theodore Dreiser's life emerges in Richard Lingeman's biography. Thus far it does not seem to, unless one counts as fresh the notion of Dreiser as first the victim and then the triumphal excoriator of American capitalism. Lingeman speaks, for example, of the Dreiser family having "come to identify with the poor," which seems an odd way of putting it when in fact they themselves were blasted poor. In his pages, entrepreneurs and industrialists of the turn of the century are for the most part depicted as robber barons, or simple villains. Thus, Cyrus McCormick is introduced as the "inventor and manufacturer of the mechanical reaper, which swept across the wheat fields of the Great Plains like hordes of locusts," which is a strange way of speaking about instruments, quite as unlocust-like as one could get, that, far from devouring the harvest, helped to bring it in. Although this bias does not thus far ruin his book, one senses Mr. Lingeman, who is the executive editor of *The Nation*, at times struggling manfully to turn Dreiser into a throbbing social conscience and incipient revolution-

4 *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907*, by Richard Lingeman; G.P. Putnam's Sons, 478 pages, \$22.95.

ary—something on the order, if you will, of a contributor to *The Nation*.

One awaits with patient amusement the ideological acrobatics that will be required of Lingeman in his second volume when he will have to deal with some of the jollier political facts of Dreiser's life. To write well about Dreiser, after all, takes a certain political balance, for Dreiser's politics were, as W. A. Swanberg (himself a liberal) called them, "a psychopathic potpourri of prejudice and zeal." Dreiser was a man who could compare Josef Stalin to the White Christ of Dostoevsky, who approved the reports of Hitler's appropriation of Catholic property in Germany, who was an anti-Semitic Zionist on the model of those bigots of yesteryear who wished to send American Negroes back to Africa. ("After L.A.," Dreiser not uncharacteristically wrote to a friend, "New York looks cluttered, grimy and Jewish." Even Mike Gold, the Party-line editor of *The New Masses*, expressed embarrassment at Dreiser's anti-Semitism.) To feature Dreiser, the novelist and the man, as simply the champion of the downtrodden will not wash, dry, or iron. Dreiser, the victim of his own immense egocentric confusions, was finally the champion—of Dreiser. His politics, being despicable, are only worth despising.

To give in to the temptation to read Dreiser's later left-wing politics back into his novels is a grievous mistake. Dreiser the unshakeable friend of the Soviet Union, the crackpot social theorist, the man with (as Mencken later called him) "an insatiable appetite for the obviously not true," only emerged after his best books were written. As Ellen Moers rightly points out, "it was only at a fairly late stage in his pursuit of understanding (to be precise, after the publication of *An American Tragedy*) that he grudgingly accorded socio-historical forces a significant and separate role in the destinies of man." Before that Dreiser, the novelist and not the crackpot, was concerned, as he himself put it in a pamphlet entitled "Life, Art and America," with "those sterner truths which life itself teaches—the unreliability of human nature; the crass chance

which strikes down and destroys our finest dreams; the fact that man in all his relationships is neither good nor evil but both." This much can be said: Dreiser pitied the weak and admired the strong, but how the weak came to be weak and the strong strong was the question that ceaselessly perturbed the novelist in him. "Why? Why? I persistently asked myself, and I have yet to find the answer in any code of morals or ethics or the dogma of any religion." His greatness as a novelist is in no small part owing to his refusal, until nearly the end, to accept any easy answers.

How the weak came to be weak was a question that Dreiser's own personal fate set him nearly at birth. He was the ninth of ten children in a family that would never recover from a financial reverse that had occurred five years before his birth. He grew up under an immigrant German father, a defeated man who had retreated into extreme religiosity. His mother was a free spirit of the type of the earth mother, superstitious, with a high capacity for abiding chaos. The family moved from one small Indiana town to another, at one low point sharing quarters, in Vincennes, Indiana, in a firehouse that was also the town's brothel. Poverty vied with scandal as the chief source of shame felt by Dreiser, whose sisters went off with married men, whose brothers lapsed into alcoholism or launched themselves on careers of sporty living, whose mother took in other people's laundry. A whole lot more than family therapy, as they say in the head trades, was indicated.

To the shame and confusion of his home-life let us now add Dreiser's physical attributes, which all fell on the debit side. Puny when a child, he was awkward and gangly as he grew older. He had buck teeth and a right eye that wandered. Sandbagged between his mother's superstitiousness and his father's brimstone religion, his own longings and humiliations left him muddling in a personal hell of insecurity, shame, and fear. While Dreiser still lived at home, one of his sisters returned home pregnant, and another

ran off with a Hurstwood-like figure named L. A. Hopkins. Although he could not have known it at the time, however wretched he must have been, the young Theodore Dreiser was raised in a laboratory that would later supply the materials for his own early novels.

With his expenses paid by a teacher who had befriended him, Dreiser was able to put in a year at Indiana University, where he felt himself an outcast, inept with girls, gawky and unathletic, a mediocre and dreamy student. Afterward he returned to Chicago, where he took up a number of flunky jobs—driving a laundry truck, collecting installment payments for a furniture company—and then, sensing a dead end to all such jobs, landed part-time work as a reporter on a Chicago paper called *The Daily Globe*. In the early 1890s, and for a long while before and after, newspapers were the graduate school and creative writing program and national endowment for writers. Twain and Howells, Cather and Crane, had put in their time working on newspapers, and so, later, did Ernest Hemingway and Ring Lardner. Good training for a novelist it was, too, for it allowed the young would-be writer to glimpse life, high and low, and to indulge his curiosity about the world in a way that no other job quite allowed.

Dreiser, whose specialty was feature writing, was by no means a bust as a newspaper man. Unattached and free-roaming, he worked on newspapers in Chicago, St. Louis, Toledo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo. He covered lynchings and train wrecks and wrote drama criticism; he interviewed celebrities from the worlds of sports and culture and industry. The atmosphere around newspapers at that time was wide open, tinged with bohemianism. Reporters kept a bottle of booze in one drawer and a novel or poem cycle in another. Mr. Lingenfelter reports that the editor of *The Republic*, one of the papers Dreiser worked on in St. Louis, used to exhort his reporters, “Remember Zola and Balzac, my boy, remember Zola and Balzac.” Imagine A. M. Rosenthal

or Ben Bradlee saying that. It was a different game.

The year 1894 was a crucial one for Dreiser, and for two reasons. For one, it was the year he met a young man named Arthur Henry—Henry was twenty-six, Dreiser twenty-three—who was city editor of *The Toledo Blade*. A would-be novelist himself, Henry encouraged Dreiser to write fiction. It was at Henry and his wife’s summer place in Maumee, Ohio, five years later, in 1899, that Dreiser, now himself married, wrote his first short story. And it was Henry who kept after Dreiser to write a novel, which Dreiser began to do in earnest that winter. The novel was *Sister Carrie*, and it was loosely based upon Dreiser’s own sister Emma, who had run off to New York with the manager of a successful saloon in Chicago. When Dreiser bogged down, Henry cheered him on; when Dreiser’s finished manuscript was deemed too long, Henry did the cutting. (Throughout his career, Dreiser had little interest in the revising or editing of his own work; he turned it out and let others trim it up.) Without Arthur Henry there probably would have been no *Sister Carrie*.

In 1894, too, Dreiser first read the evolutionist Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles* and, not to put too fine a point on it, it blew him off the court. “[Spencer] nearly killed me,” Dreiser later remarked, “took every shred of belief away from me; showed me that I was a chemical atom in a whirl of unknown forces; the realization clouded my mind.” If Spencer was correct in his argument that the transcendental design of the universe could not be known, and Dreiser was persuaded that he was correct, then religion, notions of a higher justice, ideals of moral order—all were so much screaming into the wind. Spencer did not really explain the world to Dreiser; he explained instead why it was unexplainable. Dreiser’s explosive encounter with Spencer set him on a course of extensive reading in biology and experimental psychology. It was this reading transmuted into art that, as Ellen Moers has shown, supplied the power that continues to attract generations of readers to the otherwise

seemingly uninspiring story about a country girl who runs off with a middle-aged married man who flops in New York.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser created a novel out of a plot in which no major character even approaches being a highly sentient being—technically speaking, no mean feat. Despite his stylistic crudities, he got the details of their lives right, for he was not himself so far removed from their milieu. He understood their inchoate and often trivial thoughts, and could feel what they felt. (This, wrote Mencken, “takes a kind of skill that is surely not common. Good writing is far easier.”) But, more important, he understood that his characters were not so much people who acted in the world as people upon whom the world acted—passive nouns, if a neologism may be permitted. Ellen Moers patiently lays out the way weather and light and warm food and the creak of new clothes and the crinkle of ten-dollar bills alter the moods of Dreiser’s characters. Not being thoughtful, they are chiefly desirous, and often of things of which they are not themselves entirely aware. Although Dreiser has been called a determinist, he seems to me nothing of the kind, for while his characters are at the whim of fate, it is by no means clear what fate awaits them. He has also been called a Social Darwinian, yet, apart from the Cowperwood novels, this label, too, won’t stick. Surely there is nothing of the survival of the fittest to *Sister Carrie*. Carrie Meeber, Charlie Drouet, George Hurstwood—no one character is particularly more fit than another, yet Hurstwood goes under, Drouet survives, and Carrie flourishes. Why this is so is far from clear. What is clear—painfully, profoundly clear—is that life is a mystery.

The inscrutability of life is the obsession at the center of Dreiser’s art. In *Jennie Gerhardt*, Lester Kane says to Jennie: “I don’t know whether you see what I’m driving at, but all of us are more or less pawns. We’re moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control.” Later at his, Lester’s, funeral, Dreiser notes of Jennie: “She was suffused with a sense of

sorrow, loss, beauty, and mystery. Life in all its vagueness and uncertainty seemed typified by this scene.” In *The “Genius,”* Eugene Witla calls religion “a bandage that man has invented to protect a soul made bloody by circumstances; an envelope to protect him from the unescapable and unstable illimitable.” Earlier in the same novel Eugene begins to apprehend that “life was nothing save dark forces moving aimlessly.”

And yet—another mystery?—somehow in Dreiser this dark view does not issue in anti-nomianism. “Life was desolate, inexplicable, unbelievably accidental—luck or disaster,” he told an early biographer. But that for him only made it all the more interesting. If life was a mystery, it was a damned absorbing one. In “Life, Art and America,” he wrote: “A man, if he can, should question the things that he sees—not some things, but everything—stand, as it were, in the center of this whirling storm of contradiction which we know as life, and ask of it its sources and its import.” Dreiser bent all his novelistic efforts to understanding life as it truly is—“the game as it is played.” In his blunderbuss way, within the frame of fiction, he could break through to say some chillingly true things. In *The “Genius,”* for example, he has his autobiographical hero think about his wife: “‘If only she would die,’ he said to himself, for we have the happy faculty of hating most joyously on this earth the thing we have wronged the most.” In *Jennie Gerhardt* he could strike off the following passage about what is required to make a smashing business success:

The trouble with Lester was that, while blessed with a fine imagination and considerable insight, he lacked the ruthless, narrow-minded insistence on his individual superiority which is a necessary element in almost every great business success. To be a forceful figure in the business world means, as a rule, that you must be an individual of one idea, and that idea the God-given one that life has destined you for a tremendous future in the particular field you have chosen. It means that one thing, a cake of soap, a new can-opener, a safety

razor, or speed-accelerator, must seize on your imagination with tremendous force, burn as a raging flame, and make itself the be-all and end-all of your existence. As a rule, a man needs poverty to help him to this enthusiasm, and youth. The thing he has discovered, and with which he is going to busy himself, must be the door to a thousand opportunities and a thousand joys. Happiness must be beyond or the fire will not burn as brightly as it might—the urge will not be great enough to make a great success.

Impressive though Dreiser's knowledge of the world could be, it did not usually extend to himself. Here, for example, is the way he describes Eugene Witla, the character clearly based on Theodore Dreiser from *The "Genius"* (and let us pass on the question of the tact involved in writing an autobiographical novel with that title): "Eugene was perfectly free and easy in his manner. He was never affected at any time, decidedly eager to learn things from anybody and supremely good natured." Reversing all the terms in that passage—in effect, antonymizing it—gives a much truer picture of the real Dreiser. Far from pleasant to begin with, Dreiser was made more angular, embittered, and rebarbative by the dreary reception accorded his first novel, *Sister Carrie*. Doubleday printed the book in small numbers and a hideous format. Reviewers attacked it for being immoral—Carrie Meeber, reviewers felt, was not made to pay for living outside conventional morality. Dreiser's royalties for this major work of American literature came to \$68.40. The novel had a cult following of a sort among younger readers, and it would later garner much appreciation among English reviewers in its William Heinemann edition, yet William Dean Howells, earlier so sympathetic to the work of Mark Twain and Henry James, told Dreiser to his face, "I didn't like *Sister Carrie*."

Dreiser had already begun work on *Jennie Gerhardt*, but the reaction to *Sister Carrie* drove him to nervous breakdown. The plunge in his morale was accompanied by a

plunge in his fortunes. He could no longer turn out the quick journalism by which he had supported his wife and himself. His wife temporarily moved back to Missouri to live with her family, and Dreiser, on a drug regimen for what was felt to be "neurasthenia," moved into dreary quarters in Brooklyn, searched without success for work, and began a general slide not unlike that taken in *Sister Carrie* by George Hurstwood. Dreiser was finally rescued by his brother Paul, the successful songwriter (composer of "On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away" and "My Gal Sal"), who put him in a sanatorium and arranged work for him when he came out. Dreiser's diaries for this period make painful reading, and so does his recasting of this experience in *The "Genius."* His heavily brooding nature must have had a serious workout trying to understand why, in an arbitrary and unreasoning cosmos, he was selected for this torture.

Even after Dreiser had climbed out of this slough of deepest despond, other obstacles awaited him. It was fully seven years until he returned to the writing of *Jennie Gerhardt* and three more until he saw it published. Publishers were nervous about bringing out the works of an "immoral" author—and immorality in that age meant any hint of sensuousness or any characters let off without severe punishment for, say, living with a man outside marriage. When *The "Genius"* was published in 1915, John Sumner, of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, banned the novel as obscene and blasphemous, charging it with seventy-five counts of lewdness and fourteen of profanity: mention of a female breast, at that time, counted as lewdness, taking the Lord's name in vain as profanity. With the help of H. L. Menck-en, Dreiser, standing firm, fought Sumner; he also fought publishers who beseeched him to write "moral" books; and he fought more generally for the right of authors to describe the world as they saw it. Dreiser paid the price for doing so, in delayed publication, in reduced audience, in diminished royalties. It took courage and stubbornness, and Dreiser had both. His conduct during

these difficult years marks an honorable chapter in the history of the battle against inane censorship, however empty that battle may today seem, when the cunnilinguistic rhapsodies of John Updike and the sodomic violence of Norman Mailer go directly to the best-seller tables.

Certainly his fights against the censors did not make Dreiser's nature any the sweeter. It turned him into a professional flouter of convention. At great boring length, Dreiser, so often the death of the party, would attack American prudery. From here it was only a brief jump to his turning to attack American hypocrisy, and with it everything connected to mainstream American life: religion, business, capitalism generally. This side of Dreiser, the iconoclast who wrote revolutionary books that were suppressed by the forces of American benightedness, earned him a following among the denizens of Greenwich Village and other American bohémias. Unfortunately, Dreiser himself took the role altogether seriously, and it helped steer him into many of his later political imbecilities.

Dreiser was in any case what down in Personnel they call "a difficult personality," but his struggle through life made him almost impossible. To his naturally moody, brooding, gloomy temperament Dreiser added the habit of grievance and the outlook of paranoia. He craved friendship and demanded loyalty, but was unable to sustain the former and unwilling to repay the latter. "And I give you one kindly bit of advice," he once wrote to a young admirer named Harold Husey. "Never bother to know me personally. Remain illusioned, if you can."

Good advice, this, but one may be certain that he never gave it to a woman. Not long after he emerged from his time of breakdown, Dreiser slipped free of the wife who had seen him through it, and his days of heavy, even militant, womanizing began in seriousness. At thirty-eight he blew a well-paying editorial job at the Butterick Publishing Company to chase after the seventeen-year-old daughter of a fellow employee; at sixty-two he was hot on the trail of

a freshman girl at Bryn Mawr. He used women as other men used cigars—and frequently had more than one a day. He gave the lie to Baudelaire's famous remark, *Plus un homme cultive les arts, moins il bande*. Professor Thomas Riggio writes: "His sexual appetite matched his appetite for writing and was as compulsive." A pre-Reichian, like many of the Greenwich Village characters of his day, Dreiser believed in the close connection between erotic and creative energy—and acted upon his belief. He was not a man you would want to leave alone in a room with your grandmother, and certainly not with your granddaughter.

"The days of social lies for me is dead," Dreiser wrote to a woman named Bettina Morris in yet another of his many epistolary attempts at seduction. But he continued to avail himself of every other kind of lie. Through sharp dealing he kited up the price of his own manuscripts among collectors. He employed several literary and movie agents at the same time. He asked absolute fidelity from women, which he repaid with something akin to absolute infidelity. He hated capitalism and studied the stock market. The greater the support publishers gave him the readier he was to betray them. Here he was able to tie his general deceitfulness to his very particular anti-Semitism, for the Jewish-owned firms of Liveright and Simon & Schuster, both of which had aided him when he much needed them, he accused of being part of a Jewish plot against him. It was at bottom his anti-Semitism that attracted him to Hitler. The day of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, however much it may have shocked other American Communists and fellow-travellers, was a day on which everything came together for Dreiser: his anti-Semitism, his anti-capitalism, his anglophobia, his anti-Americanism. "I ceased following Hitler," he wrote to Mencken, "when . . . he attacked Russia—my pet."

Well, enough beating of a dead author. If I have dwelt at some length on Theodore Dreiser's failures of character, it is not merely because his life provides examples of

them in such plentitude but because his life raises a larger issue, namely: How could so clearly unpleasant a man, a man in his life so egocentric in his art be so sympathetic, in his life so mean in his art be so generous, in his life so ignorant in his art be so smart? In George Hurstwood, Theodore Dreiser created the most persuasive portrait in literature of a man in social, psychological, physical, and moral decline. In Jennie Gerhardt he created a pure victim of fate who never loses her inherent goodness of character—and few things in literary art are more difficult than making goodness convincing. In Frank Cowperwood he was able, as Mencken put it, “to give plausibility to the motives, feelings and processes of mind of a man whose salient character is that they transcend all ordinary experience.” In Clyde Griffiths, of *An American Tragedy*, he created a character whom, despite his trivial ambitions, his weakness, even his guilt, one wants to survive, and one feels as if a part of oneself has been plowed under when he doesn’t. How did Dreiser do it—this bore, crank, celery-juice drinker, and member of the select company of morons who believed that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was part Jewish?

In some artists—Flaubert, James—imagination is at the service of intelligence, while in others—Whitman, Tolstoy—intelligence is entirely at the service of imagination. Dreiser was clearly among the others. Out-

side his novels, he was powerfully ignorant; within them, he could be dazzlingly penetrating. Fate decreed that he come to literature at a time when the Victorian novel was over—*Sister Carrie* was published in 1900—and the new novel was about to come into being. More than any other novelist, he helped usher it in. He wrote with the confidence of the Victorians but without their optimism. As Ellen Moers noted, “he handled words, sometimes brilliantly, sometimes wretchedly, [but] without the sound of pebbles in his mouth.” He broke the rules by speculating in fiction about the nature and purpose of the universe and the status of human beings within it, and got away with it. Goodness was not of necessity rewarded in his novels, nor evil punished—goodness and evil were scarcely at issue. This was revolutionary. In *The “Genius,”* a novel filled with every kind of clumsiness and self-deception, Dreiser writes about Eugene Witla, the artist-hero who is so obviously himself: “He thought that his art was a gift, that he had been sent to revolutionize art in America, or carry it one step forward, and that nature was thus constantly sending its apostles or special representatives over whom it kept watch and in whom it was well pleased.” But why would nature choose a man such as Theodore Dreiser for the task? Even to consider the question is to recognize the possibility that we may be in the presence of yet another Dreiserian cosmic mystery.

Poems by *Daniel Mark Epstein,*
Patricia Clark, David Bergman, Luke Zilles
& Florence Grossman

The carpenter

Old enough to know her father's need
for sleep, she would not wake him with her cry.
Through quartered window glass the cold
rides on the moonlight flooding her room,
casting a shadow cross on the bare wall.
She would not cry although the light seems cruel

as winter, cutting through the quilts and sheet,
tightens its grip on her legs. The pain there
thrives on, though raised in the dull heat
of summer when fever with a brutal hand
yanked the legs from under her, folding them
back to kneel as if she must pray forever.

But something stirs her father. And he turns
in his own pain, wakeful, knowing her awake,
leaves his bed and climbs the narrow stair;
rising toward the moon in the window beside her,
he sees her speechless eyes and smooths her hair.
He pulls a chair up to the glass that shines

in its beveled skin of ice. A single fingernail
rough work has left intact, becomes his tool
scratching on one quarter of the pane: a flower.
His daughter smiles to see it bloom in silver
on the moonlit wall, the first of a full garden
where two lovers are walking hand in hand.

It has been years since he has known
this freedom of making, since necessity
bartered plane and chisel for his pen.
He moves on to the second pane, a woman rocking
a child, its curled hand reaching for her lips,
her hair bound in a low hive but for a strand.

His daughter's eyes are moonwide now, yet calm,
eager for the next image. His cold hand
etches on the third pane a fine rose window
and altar rail where a young woman is kneeling,
her dress and petticoats ruffled like a peony,
under the priest's blessing, her first communion.

Smiling, she nods. One pane is frosted blind.
He cannot think to move his hand, it moves
as her eyes close, rescued from this vision:
he draws a hill and road that winds behind
where men and women vanish two by two,
climbing in slow procession, following, what?

The sudden heat of breath and hands has made
a rainstorm on the landscape—his work is done.
He kisses her asleep. On the stray fringe
of frozen light from the golden mural he gropes
his way downstairs, thanking the full moon,
knowing the sun will never be so kind.

—*Daniel Mark Epstein*

Composition in neutral tones

All I have of nature's in this jar—
Driftwood, acorns, and a chip of glass,
Assorted chestnuts, pebbles from a shore.

A composition in neutral tones perhaps
Is all they come to, separated now
From singular moments of the past

They once evoked. I'm afraid that's how
The past seems, like a country I've left—
Northern, burdened with snow,

Impossibly far to travel to again. At last,
With great reluctance, I'm growing accustomed
To a land vastly different from the one I lost.

Those days, I stopped on paths to the ocean,
Or bent down awkwardly on a wintry walk,
To pick up, for a later time, a talisman.

I've forgotten the name of the beach,
Or whose pocket I curled my hand in
As we strolled, and the day's talk

Has vanished, too, but not a sense of abandon
The waves and gusty wind lent, nor the thought
Of something being looked for, even then.

—*Patricia Clark*

Daughters denying the dreams of their father

Mother and her sisters tried to disabuse
their father of his dream—someday returning
to see the place where he was born, a village
so small no map has deigned to give it a dot.

Their objections were reasonable enough:
in his eighties, he was far too old to leave
on the long, harsh trip to Lithuania
should the Soviets issue him a visa.

Besides, if such a village still existed
(and with two world wars and a revolution
they had cause to doubt), it had probably changed
beyond human powers of recognition.

“Surely by now everyone you knew is dead,”
his daughters told him, “Even the boys with whom
you’d gone to school. Dead or moved away. Or else
they’ve long forgotten you and your family.”

Against such arguments he was left no choice
but admit defeat. It was true what they said.
And he tried to freeze the animate faces
from his childhood into a final repose.

But they wouldn’t rest, and for minutes or hours
or entire afternoons my grandfather,
with grandchildren tumbling loudly around him,
would be lost to us, lost in his reveries.

He was back among the invisible life
of his youth, leaping over the leaf-choked ruts
and hedges, smelling the barley fields at dusk
or the damp musk of pressed serge in the workroom.

In his ears were the cackles of old women
dickering over the price of gabardine,
or the drone of flies as plump as ripe berries
and men arguing Talmud with the rabbis.

At ninety, he no longer spoke of going,
and his daughters rejoiced at their victory,
never expressing what they really dreaded,
the vision of the unchanged world of his birth:

houses blue and golden as a Marc Chagall
where girls open their arms to patchwork fiddlers.
A bridegroom's glass shatters into prickly stars,
and their father is lost to them forever.

—*David Bergman*

Work

To clover,
the red that beds the embers,
the white that spreads the ashes
of these burning hours,

when sunlight
travels through the weave
and mesh of shadows like nectar
through a sieve,

the bees,
abrim with sunny business,
return over and over
to work the flowers.

Work without hope
still works, drawing from ardor—
the burning of their wings—

and from endeavor—
the humming of their activity—
a treasure

not of honey,
to store a hive where hope
without work would die.

—*Luke Zilles*

Wildflowers

I scour the side of the road
for wildflowers, what anyone

might call weeds, marsh rose,
primrose, quaker lady and those
not even the book has named.

I try to settle them
into a garden, false foxglove and pearly
everlasting, but they hang their heads.

Not the south side of the house,
not the stone wall,
it's the road they want,

the rush of wind, the backlash
of winter sand and salt. They want
to be part of the scenery,

the surprise in the dust, what we take
for granted.

—*Florence Grossman*

Windfalls

Windfalls, we called them, the apples
we gathered, my grandmother and I.
Sharp or sweet from tree to tree, apple to apple,

we cooked them with their jackets on for color,
filled jars of them
seasoned with cinnamon and sugar, the gift

from the side of the road.
You could hope for it
the rest of your life, things

coming together out of the blue,
like apples and wind, like words.
You could mistake it

for water, the wind building in the trees,
gathering the way a wave gathers
until it passes over your head.

—*Florence Grossman*

The Met's failed *Walküre*

by Samuel Lipman

A palpable air of unease these days surrounds the Metropolitan Opera. There is, it is true, some good news: after a poor showing last season at the box office, ticket sales for the current season have picked up. Reportedly, Bruce Crawford, the Met's new general manager, is looking forward to a more than ninety percent sold-out year. But the good news doesn't go beyond ticket sales. The press seems lukewarm, albeit respectful. Opera fans complain of arbitrary casting policies and a general dearth of great singers. Except for James Levine, the Met engages curiously few conductors with large careers or even international reputations. And there is a noticeable absence of innovative—that is, avant-garde—stage direction, resulting in lack of controversy surrounding the Met's offerings of familiar works.

One does not know how far to go in blaming the Met for the vocal shortcomings of its casts. For many years it has hardly been a secret that singers' careers now seem to burn out more rapidly than they used to. All too frequently the collapse of highly ballyhooed young voices reminds one of the glib and venomous remark (attributed to Georges Clemenceau) about America's being the only society that went from barbarism to decadence without passing through civilization. There is indeed a shortage of conductors of overwhelming musical personality. The result is that there is a dearth of excellent but routine conductors working in the

geniuses' musical wake, following the patterns they have established.

The Met's problems are clearly not financial. The company has not been unwilling to spend money on its productions; indeed, it has undertaken expensive and complicated stagings. The Zeffirelli staging of Puccini's *La Bohème* involved a financial and technical effort that would have bankrupted almost any other company. The Met's costumes are lavish, the orchestra is generously staffed, and the chorus is full and well rehearsed. In general, the Met gives every impression of honestly trying to do its best to provide New York—and the United States—with the best opera company in the world. It is even possible, though hardly reassuring, that in this goal the Met has largely succeeded.

But despite all the Metropolitan Opera's undoubted virtues, the unease remains. One important source of this unease is the Met's equivocal approach to doing the most serious works of the repertory. And yet even here the problem is fairly subtle. It is not that the Met performs trash: it is a rare occasion when the company performs a really second-rate opera. Nor has the Met failed to perform great works: it has regularly presented such masterpieces as Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Così fan tutte*, Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Wagner's *Parsifal*, Verdi's *Aida* and *Otello*, Strauss's *Salome*, *Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*, and Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. And there are on occasion worthwhile novelties, like the French and

Stravinsky triple-bills of recent seasons. All this takes place, as it should, in a general context of the Met's attempting to please large audiences through the exhibition of celebrated voices singing works of proven appeal.

And yet the problem of the Met's contribution to a serious operatic culture remains. It has even intensified as recent highly publicized administrative changes have begun to communicate an organizational and financial solidity which must be the envy of all other American companies. Much of this problem has been due to the Met's settled unwillingness to schedule the most musically demanding twentieth-century works. Some of these works, such as Pfitzner's *Palestrina* and Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler*, only promise to bore the supposedly sophisticated New York audience silly; others, such as Schoenberg's much-feared *Moses und Aron*, offer the possibility of actively offending the sensibilities of a public always tempted to see Puccini as high culture. Then too there is the problem of the Met's nonexistent relation to American opera; with the exception of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, the Met has not done an American opera since the late 1960s, when it put on Marvin David Levy's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It is not just new *American* operas, one must hasten to add, that have fallen under the Met's ban: with the exception of the works of the musically safe Benjamin Britten, no new European works have been done since Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* in 1953. There seems little likelihood that this situation will change any time soon: even the Met's much-trumpeted new commissions from Jacob Druckman and John Corigliano hold out little promise of producing works of lasting musical importance.

But it would be wrong to assume that the Met's problems of musical seriousness are entirely confined to an unwillingness to produce new, or even relatively recent, operatic compositions. There is clearly something wrong with the Met's approach to the universally accepted cornerstones of the

repertory, to those works whose purely musical stature marks them as both symphonic and operatic masterpieces. At no time have the Met's failings in this regard seemed clearer, or more disconcerting, than at the beginning of its current season, with its performances of *Die Walküre*, the second part of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

There can be little doubt that those responsible for the Met's administration, Messrs. Levine and Crawford, attempted to meet the challenge head-on. They scheduled the four-hour work for opening night, in a new production by Otto Schenk. Neither Mr. Levine nor Mr. Schenk had ever before done the *Ring*, or any of its four constituents, and that only seemed to emphasize the Met's desire to break new ground. There was a further reason, too, that doing *Die Walküre* at this time seemed to throw down the gauntlet to the company's critics: it was announced at the end of last season that the Met will be recording all four operas of the *Ring* over the course of the next several years for Deutsche Grammophon, and that this will be the first *Ring* made specifically for compact discs.

Because good news in music is nowadays in short supply, it would be pleasant indeed to report that this production of *Die Walküre* marked an auspicious beginning to the Met's great project. Unfortunately, I cannot, for I have seen *Die Walküre* several times before, and I have an extensive acquaintance with its recorded literature. Measured against the evidence of the past on stage and on record, this production failed both scenically and musically; measured in its own terms, the Met's new *Walküre* failed to convince, and in the process failed to give the kind of satisfaction that is to be expected from a major performance of a great work.

Critical attention, both before the event and after, has tended to concentrate on the staging. There can be no doubt that Mr. Schenk's direction, complemented by Günther Schneider-Siemssen's sets, did mark the kind of radical break with the past that this production was designed to accomplish.

In *Die Walküre*, Mr. Schenk employed the romantic naturalism so applauded in his 1977 production of *Tannhäuser* at the Met. The company's 1986-87 souvenir booklet praises that production for "its evocative beauty, shrewd exploitation of the Met's physical plant and its artful return to a representational style after the long reign of Wieland Wagner-inspired mythic starkness."

What the Met booklet referred to as "the long reign of Wieland Wagner-inspired mythic starkness" had meant, at the Met, the 1967 Herbert von Karajan *Ring* production, which was created originally for the Easter Festivals at Salzburg. Very much in the Wieland Wagner tradition (which dates back to the first post-World War II Bayreuth productions of the *Ring* in 1951), Karajan's stage was dim and virtually empty, with a few platforms set at different heights and distances from the front; dark and hulking shapes filled in for palpable rocks and trees. The backdrops were simple projections of semi-abstract clouds and forms drawn from the cosmos. Like Wieland Wagner, Karajan put his characters in conflict with each other. The resultant instinctual forces of greed, treachery, and murder were played out against a background of what Matthew Arnold called (in "Dover Beach") "... the vast edges drear/And naked shingles of the world."

By contrast, in the Met's new production the lights were turned up, and there were real trees. The sets took up much of the available stage area, with massive rock formations closing off approximately one quarter of the stage on the (audience) right. Much notice has been taken of the fact that in the new production the rear doors of Hunding's hut actually opened to reveal the fluorescently lit, leafy beauties of a spring night, as Siegmund sang his aria-like "*Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond*" ("Winterstorms made way for the month of May"). There was general applause too for all the jagged rocks in Act II, and for the very realistic fire in which Wotan, with the fire-god Loge's help, wrapped his daughter Brünnhilde as she lay sleeping on the rocks at the end of the opera. And with the lights

up, it was easy to see other features of the production: a giant tree trunk in Act I with what looked to be a very bad complexion, the dimstore weapons and helmets, the clothing made out of what appeared in some cases to be pieced rags, and the charming visage of Wotan's hectoring wife Fricka, gotten up with two pigtails in front to look like Pocahontas.

Not only did this production manage to restore all the ghastly tinsel which Wieland Wagner (and his brother Wolfgang also) had relegated to the musty museum of operatic horrors. Even worse was the way in which the bright lights, the realistic sets and costumes, and the enclosing of the stage area combined to render Wagner's gods and goddesses less than life-size. Here were all-too-human beings, shown in bright light for all the world to see just how impossible it is to act convincingly while singing difficult music at the full volume necessary to fill the enormous space of the Metropolitan Opera House. One wonders whether Mr. Schenk and his lighting director Gil Wechsler realize just how well they have filled the role of a none-too-friendly radiologist.

While it is difficult not to have sympathy for the impossible position singers are put in when they must act Wagner as well as sing his music, two enormities in particular must be mentioned. The first came perilously close to exciting laughter, and the second actually did. In Act I, as the handsome and youthful Siegmund (tenor Peter Hofmann) and the extremely beautiful Sieglinde (soprano Jeannine Altmeyer) went about discovering both that they were brother and sister and that they were passionately in love, I kept thinking that they really acted like small-town high-school students bent on exchanging valentines. The second risible moment came in Act II when Wotan (baritone Simon Estes), enraged at his inability to protect Siegmund from Hunding (bass Aage Haugland), Sieglinde's outraged husband, struck Hunding dead with a wave of his hand. Here the artificiality of Wotan's motions, combined with Hunding's hokey stage fall, actually produced guff-

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faws from several persons around me in the audience. Of the acting of the Brünnhilde and her sister Valkyries, it is enough to say that at their most clumsy they recalled Anna Russell's parodies of the *Ring*.

And then there was the singing. As vocalism *qua* vocalism, I found it undistinguished, and frequently only barely acceptable. The weakest member of the cast was Peter Hofmann as Siegmund. His voice has a marked wobble, of which he must be aware, for he often failed to hold long notes long enough. As Sieglinde, Jeannine Altmeyer displayed an attractive voice, though one without a particularly distinctive quality. I did not like the singing of mezzo-soprano Brigitte Fassbaender as Fricka. She seemed to lack an even vocal production, and her chest register sounded particularly strident. The Brünnhilde, Hildegard Behrens, was noticeably cautious in her traversal of the famous *Hojotoho* whoops at the beginning of Act II; elsewhere, her voice often wobbled. Simon Estes, as Wotan, seemed comfortable with the notes, and often produced a singu-

larly melodious and sometimes even powerful tone. I thought that the Valkyries in Act III sang on a level embarrassing in a great opera house; one difficult passage toward the end of the long Valkyrie scene seemed to have strayed in from a rehearsal of twelve-tone music.

But there is more to singing than vocalism, important as pure sound is. There are the problems of the dramatic comprehension of the text and the musical comprehension of the notes. Dramatic comprehension is not simply a matter of good diction; as a matter of fact, I thought that on the whole the words were well articulated on this occasion. Dramatic comprehension involves singing the words as if they were one's own. Here the requirement is total immersion in the character being portrayed. With the fortunate exception of Simon Estes's Wotan, I thought the vocal characterization was poor and even at times completely lacking. Musical comprehension can go a long way toward making up for inability to penetrate an operatic character, but in this production

the vocal surge and flow—in a single word, the passion—of Wagner's music was in short supply.

But other performances, containing all the weak elements I have described above, have turned out to be absorbing experiences in the opera house. The reason, of course, was the quality of the musical direction coming from the podium. In the end, great opera, no matter how important the voices might be, no matter how interesting the production may be, rests on the shoulders of one individual: the conductor. And here the Met's new *Walküre* was an abject failure. Much of this failure must be chalked up simply to Mr. Levine's not having conducted the work before. But he has done other Wagner, including *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal*, the last not just for many years at the Met, but also in Bayreuth in 1982, on the hundredth anniversary of the work's premiere. Clearly, he feels confident enough in his own conception of *Die Walküre* to be conducting it in the Deutsche Grammophon recording this coming spring.

Mr. Levine has a reputation for being a nervous, often aggressive, operatic conductor. I have never found these qualities to appear in his Wagner. On the contrary, I find his Wagner conducting to be pale and static, as if he were paralyzed by respect for the Master. In *Parsifal*, such an approach can easily seem like reverence for the solemnity of the score and the stage action, but in *Die Walküre* such reserve—if that is what it is—can only eviscerate the opera's content. So it was on this occasion. From the opening musical description of the storm beating on Siegmund as he comes exhausted into Hunding's hut, everything seemed heavy and passionless. Rather than being given individual meaning and weight, the rapidly moving quarter notes of the Prelude were accented in groups of two, giving the impression of plodding rather than running. The beautiful themes associated with Sieglinde's growing excitement were played dutifully and even flaccidly. By the end of Act I, the lovers seemed to be having such a

difficult time getting aroused on the stage that one fervently wished them better luck as they ran out of the hut to embrace under the spring moonlight.

Act II is a difficult act for all concerned because of the long stretches of narrative, taking place first between Wotan and Fricka, then between Wotan and Brünnhilde, then between Siegmund and Sieglinde, and finally between Siegmund and Brünnhilde. Here there are many short silences, meant to be pregnant pauses; when these silences are seemingly of random length, as they were in this production, when they lack a musical presence in their very silence, then all action—musical and dramatic—comes to a dead halt. In the final act, with its immensely touching scene of Brünnhilde's exalted acceptance of her future as Siegfried's bride, and Wotan's farewell to her, Mr. Levine's conducting produced only a kind of stately indulgence in lush harmonies and cushioned orchestral playing. On this occasion, Mr. Levine's tempos were very slow, and the total performance was almost a half hour longer than in the Met's exciting and vocally impressive 1975-76 performances under Sixten Ehrling. The great sweep necessary to carry off a long opera was missing, and the result was simply boredom.

There will be more performances at the Met of *Die Walküre* this spring, and then the recording will be made. The cast will in all probability be quite different from the fall's, though Hildegard Behrens will remain as Brünnhilde. Of the others to be in the recording, only James Morris, as Wotan, has been announced. Mr. Levine, it goes without saying, will be the conductor.

There will be formidable competition for this new recording. Even the recording's technological newness may not be an advantage, for older *Ring* recordings are now being remastered for release on compact disc. These two- to three-decade-old complete *Ring* performances by Karajan, Böhm, Solti, and Furtwängler remain summits of the Wagnerian conductor's art; the singing they contain is on a level apparently unreachable

today, as the recent Boulez recording of the 1976 Bayreuth *Ring* production suggests. Also in existence are so-called "pirate" recordings, taken from radio broadcasts, of all the Bayreuth *Rings* from the early 1950s through 1960. On these reasonably good-sounding recordings there are such great conductors as Clemens Krauss and Hans Knappertsbusch, and such great singers as Hans Hotter and the still undervalued Astrid Varnay.

And then there are the recordings of a half-century ago, of the golden age of Wagnerian singing. Here, in a discussion of *Die Walküre*, it suffices to mention the 1935 Lauritz Melchior-Lotte Lehmann recording of Act I, with the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Bruno Walter.¹ Act II is available in a brilliant recording which uses, for the Siegmund-Sieglinde section of the act, the same singers, orchestra and conductor; those parts of the act solely involving Wotan, Fricka, and Brünnhilde are done by Hotter, Margarete Klose, and Marta Fuchs, with Bruno Seidler-Winkler conducting the Berlin State Opera Orchestra.² So far as Act III is concerned, I am partial to a 1945 recording by the great American Wagnerian soprano Helen Traubel and Herbert Janssen,

a commanding even if not vocally splendid Wotan; this recording has the New York Philharmonic in its best days, conducted by the excellent Artur Rodzinski.³

One hates always to be driven back to the recordings of the past, into what must seem to those who know not its riches as nostalgia and nothing more. For those who do know these riches, a better *Walküre* and a better *Ring* exist than can now be seen at the Met. Till matters change, one piece of advice can suffice to conjure a stage picture to go with the wonderful sound which can still be heard on records: use your imagination.

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- 1 This fiery performance is available in an excellent LP transfer on EMI Référence (France) 2C 051-03023. There can be little doubt that it will soon be available as a compact disc.
 - 2 This recording is a good deal harder to get than the Vienna Act I mentioned above. The Walter sections alone are still available on Vox Turnabout THS65163. The complete Act II is available in the wonderful French EMI set 2902123, *Les Introuvables du Chant Wagnérien*; it is also available on Volume IV of the Danacord (Denmark) collection of the complete recordings of Lauritz Melchior.
 - 3 This recording is still available, electronically enhanced for stereo, on CBS Odyssey 32260018E.

The sketchbooks of Picasso

by Jed Perl

From art we want both quality and qualities. *Quality* depends on the superior harmony of parts; it results from the artist's overcoming of the personal, from his absorption in the disinterested (but also fluid) laws of a medium. *Qualities* are precisely personal; they're the products of a particular intelligence and sensibility as it makes its unique little response to the blaze of everyday life. Art is propelled forward by a healthy rivalry between the two Q's.

Modern art has been said to favor quality over qualities; as a theory, "modernism" certainly does. And yet Picasso, who died thirteen years ago, now engages us especially through the proliferation of his qualities. One had always known of the ponderous neoclassical figure style of the early 1920s; of the swirly, psychedelic-colored Marie-Thérèses of the early 1930s. But how many of us, before the Museum of Modern Art retrospective in 1980 and the opening of the Musée Picasso in 1985, had been prepared for the fullness of these periods, for their elaboration of qualities? If 1900-1925 has been, for two generations, the quarter century of Picasso's career that seems most essential, we may now feel that 1915-1940—from Synthetic Cubism to Dora Maar—is the quarter century we want to look at the most. It's the period when the onslaught of qualities put quality on the defensive.

Picasso's sketchbooks have only just come into public view, and they reveal the artist as

(if possible) more than ever an inventor of new qualities. At the magnificent show of sketchbooks mounted by the Pace Gallery in New York this past summer (it's now on tour), one could feel humbled by the extraordinary bulk of the material.¹ The plenitude of the sketchbooks—there are, apparently, a hundred and seventy-five separate ones—introduces into the already overfull career a whole new dimension. The Pace Gallery gave the show a clever title: "Je suis le cahier," a phrase which is inscribed on the cover of a notebook from 1906-07. But a cleverer title would have been: "Just when you thought you'd seen all of Picasso: The Sketchbooks." In time, one's initial unease gave way to something like relief: these crowded notebooks, with their many different formats, are a kind of confession, a testament to the plain hard work of the artist's

1 "Je suis le cahier" was on view at the Pace Gallery from May 2 to August 1. The show is currently at the Royal Academy of Art in London through November 15, and will travel thereafter to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (December 19 to January 25, 1987), the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco (February 14 to March 29), the Phoenix Art Museum (April 22 to June 3), and various other locations. The catalogue was published by Atlantic Monthly Press (360 pages, \$65) and includes a foreword by Claude Picasso as well as essays by Robert Rosenblum, Gert Schiff, Theodore Reff, E. A. Carmean, Rosalind Krauss, and Sam Hunter.

life—to the trial and error, the false starts, the repetitions. The Picasso of the sketchbooks is rather like the dancer in the practice studio. He's holding back a bit, blocking things in, rather than going full out. The drawings here occasionally achieve the grandeur that comes with taking the ultimate risk; they more often have the interest born of a willingness to make mistakes, to try something different ways.

A sketchbook seems to have been, for Picasso, the plotting-out of a world. The ones from around 1900 describe a crowded scene based in equal parts on direct observation and the art of Steinlen and Toulouse-Lautrec. The figures take nervous, *fin-de-siècle* poses, which are softened by Picasso's black crayon lines. These singers, dancers, waiters, and bohemians live in a hazy atmosphere composed of nights in cheap cabarets and mornings in rooms where the wallpaper has probably gone gray with neglect. A half-decade later, in the *Saltimbriques Sketchbook* of 1905, the light has cleared and, in a circus world bounded by reminiscences of Puvis de Chavannes, slender young men look off into the distance, indifferent to the surrounding company of proper young girls, fat jesters, and carousing nudes. In the *Demoiselles Sketchbook* of 1907, civilization has backtracked to a forest of anonymous African goddesses, each as rigid and symmetrical as a caryatid, all inscrutable in their insistent presentation of buttock and breast, in their ritualistic raising and lowering of huge arms. And on and on: magic shows where cardboard clowns do disappearing acts amidst a polka-dot decor; an Olympus of blank-eyed Grecian goddesses and forty-pound babies; surreal beach-party shenanigans; wartime psycho-hysteria; pulchritudinous bobby-soxers; and, finally, in the 1960s, the somewhat impersonal couplings of pornographic bedroom farce.

Though the sketchbooks contain great individual sheets, their mood is essentially discursive, even a bit unfocused. For Picasso a sketchbook was a kind of getting-acquainted session, a relaxed walk across a newly discovered landscape. One might have expected

the sketchbooks to underline the commonly held idea of the post-Cubist Picasso as an idea-man whose natural medium was the drawing. (As the story goes, Picasso hardly cared what colors he used when he painted.) In fact, the sketchbooks give the opposite impression; they show how Picasso's ideas cry out for the consummation of oil paint. Nowhere at Pace was this so clear as in a 1922 drawing of an enormous, dewy-eyed mother and her equally massive boy-child. This dazzlingly virtuosic confection of spun silver tones is awash in neo-classic nostalgia—for Raphael, for Proudhon. The monumental scale and tree-like limbs of the figures (they swallow up the page) aren't supported by the technique; the draftsmanship is brilliant, but in a nineteenth-century academic sort of way. One misses the weight of oil paint, the density of surface which gives to the stylistically related *Large Bather* in the Guillaume Collection (c. 1921-22) and the *Pipers of Pan* in the Musée Picasso (1923) their peculiar modern force. At Pace the modesty of the sketches, with their almost nervous pursuit of contradictory effects, brought the profundity of the oils into ever higher relief.

Last winter, a sketchbook Picasso took with him to the beach at Dinard in Brittany in 1928 was the subject of a separate exhibition at William Beadleston Fine Art.² The Beadleston show (which passed without receiving the attention it deserved) included all the sheets from the Dinard album (it has been disbound) as well as related paintings and sculptures, and gave an in-depth view of the sketcher at work. At Beadleston one saw a long, unwinding sequence of pages—a cinematographic effect. In one series of six drawings a woman tossing a ball is taken

2 "Through the Eye of Picasso 1928-1934" was on display at William Beadleston Fine Art (60 East Ninety-first Street in New York) from October 31 to December 14, 1985. The catalogue was published by the gallery (125 pages, \$25), with an introduction by John Richardson.

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through a steeplechase of kaleidoscope variations; her body keeps resolving into new configurations, ever more surprising. This wild erotic fantasy is carried out with cold mathematical logic, as if Picasso were seeing exactly how many transformations he could wreak on a single female theme. It was particularly interesting at Beadleston to see a 1928-29 wire sculpture (which Picasso suggested as a monument to Apollinaire) surrounded by a series of preparatory drawings from the sketchbook. These drawings are meditations on the third dimension; they aren't just flat things, but mappings of alternate courses through space, of routes going in various directions. Thoughts about form-in-space appear all through the sketchbooks: from the six separate studies which circle around the same seated boy in the *Saltimbanques* book of 1905 to the series of views of a woman's head, with the nose twisted every which way, in a 1964 book that happened to be the final work included in the Pace show. At Beadleston the suggestiveness of the sketchbooks—of, for example, a series

of figure-like abstractions constructed of smooth, bone- and stone-shaped volumes—spilled over into the full-bodied emotion of the sculptures and paintings. Against the modernist idea of the artist as absorbed with the things directly in front of him, the sketchbooks offer *invention*.

Taken one by one, the books have about them an intimacy we rarely associate with the dimensions of Picasso's career. There are tiny notebooks: one from 1924 contains little still lifes in pencil and pastel that can only be described as adorable. All through the Pace show one was conscious of the pleasure to be derived from different formats and different types of paper. These sketchbooks bring to mind the sensuousness that an artist experiences when he's in the art-supply store, or when he sits down before the table well stocked with fine materials, ready to get to work. The great pile of books—nearly three-quarters of a century worth—reveal Picasso as before all else a dedicated craftsman. This dedication is the result of a training in certain methods and a

knowledge of the proper use of materials. Picasso apparently takes a certain pleasure in living within the loose boundaries of an ancient system of law. The sketchbooks convey a comfortableness that grows out of loyalty, fondness, habit.

The Picasso of the sketchbooks can at times be a bit stuffy, overly preoccupied with showing off a command of the tools of the trade. But hubris is understandable in the complete professional who carries a heavy weight of obligation. Despite what's often been said about the running down of Picasso's energy in the later decades of a long life, the sketchbooks show him to have been workmanlike to the end. Indeed, he may at times have failed not through an excess of casualness, but through an excess of craft—by a too great insistence that everything be gotten down on paper, be made concrete. As much in 1960 as in 1900, he's the meticulous practitioner—trying the head a bit to the left, a bit to the right, from this angle, from that angle. The paintings he finished in a few hours, in a day, are the result of a long, apparently arduous preparation—the sketchbooks testify to this. Picasso's vision was, it turns out, learned, acquired. Which makes it, really, all the more miraculous.

In 1955, Picasso had this to say about the sixteenth-century German painter Albrecht Altdorfer:

I've been copying Altdorfer. It's really fine work. There's everything there—a little leaf on the ground, one cracked brick different from the others. There's a picture with a sort of little balcony—the closet, I call it. All the details are integrated. It's beautiful. We lost all that, later on These things ought to be copied, as they were in the past, but I know no one would understand.

This isn't the ordinary voice we associate with Picasso; it's a side of his personality which the sketchbooks—long salted away, now an object of study and admiration—bring to the fore. That these books were hidden is interesting; they constitute a kind of professional secret, a mystery of the trade. Picasso had, after all, been the son of a teacher in a provincial art school; he'd worked from the casts; gone through (albeit very rapidly) the course of study of an academy; and done a large figure composition to signify the end of his apprenticeship—a deathbed scene, with a nun and a dedicated doctor, for whom his father had been the model. Afterwards Picasso took up the bohemian life, left for Paris, and helped to invent the language of a new age; but the hard labor of a fitfully successful father in the dim academic backwaters of *fin-de-siècle* Europe—this was a lesson in the trials of craft that Picasso never forgot.

Little bronzes from Vienna

by Creighton Gilbert

Small-scale bronze sculpture is one of the many kinds of visual art that artists and their public have consistently regarded as marginal specialties. Ordinarily consisting of a figure somewhere from ten to eighteen inches high—though the figure is a bit less the dominant form here than in traditional sculpture as a whole—it has tacitly been treated as a subject of minor interest, a passion for the few. Large collections of superior examples are found only in a few places, notably the Bargello in Florence and the Louvre. Another is Vienna, and it is thus an unusual occasion for us to be able to see seventy-five of the finer such sculptures from the Vienna Museum on a tour of Washington, Chicago, and Los Angeles.¹ A minor, yet powerful reason for the “obscurity” of this art is that it is literally too dark to see well. Typically dark brown or near black, the works are filled with active modeling detail, and reflections off the shiny surfaces add

problems, especially when they are in the obligatory glass cases. The original owners expected to handle them. So it is well worth mentioning how good the lighting is at the National Gallery, bringing out the figures much more vividly than is usual. A great many spotlights from all directions are employed. It is surprising to compare the originals with the color reproductions in the catalogue (which include every object, another boon). The color differs a lot in the two places. This is not because the reproductions are bad, as one might too hastily assume. They were simply made in a different, and apparently less effective, light.

The emphasis of the Vienna show is on the Renaissance in Italy. It was indeed one of the peaks for this art, which, like other marginal art forms, has had a lot of ups and downs. During the Renaissance, small bronzes shared in a widespread pattern in the visual arts, having an early center of action in Florence and then shifting to the area of Venice. That history is well reflected in the exhibition: the sculptures showing the early Florentine achievement are wonderful, if few, while the Venetian development can be seen in rich variety.

The show does have an unfortunate effect of starting at the top and, with certain big exceptions, sliding down to trivia, imitations, and baubles. Such a traversal has an interesting parallel in the history of engraving, another marginal art. Engraving was invented in the early Renaissance and quickly

1 The exhibition, “Renaissance Master Bronzes from the Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna,” is on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., until November 30. It will be at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from December 18 to February 18, and at the Art Institute of Chicago from March 15 to June 5. The catalogue under the same title, by Manfred Leithe-Jasper—director of the department of sculpture and decorative art at the Kunsthistorisches Museum—is published by Scala Books; 304 pages, 76 color plates, \$19.95.

involved great artists, but by the end of the seventeenth century it was mostly a field for routine reproductions. That slide was stemmed for a while by sheer virtuosity, in the engraver Goltzius, who offers a striking parallel to his contemporary Giambologna, the virtuoso sculptor of small bronzes and much else. The beginnings of both arts had personal and technical links as well; one thinks of the artists as having been stimulated to try out new possibilities. The exhibition evokes such large speculations, but of course its best point is rightly the individual works.

At the entrance to the show in Washington, item number two confronts us with great effect. This is an unusually complex piece, which one of the catalogue authors not unreasonably tags as perhaps the most beautiful among the works he singles out to discuss. The life of the artist, Bertoldo, is obscure, like those of many of the other artists who worked in this field, and the little we know of him does not seem to add up to a whole. The facts range from his early activity as one of Donatello's assistants to his last years as a kind of curator of the ancient classical sculpture that Lorenzo the Magnificent kept in a garden in Florence. The boy Michelangelo had the run of this garden, so Bertoldo is somehow associated with him, too. One letter of Bertoldo's, to Lorenzo, survives; it is about cooking, and full of puzzling jokes. Bertoldo's half dozen known works are just as miscellaneous. This one shows a man and a horse side by side, the winged horse Pegasus (from Greek myth) being tamed, or better, broken, by the hero Bellerophon, an ideal nude. The two figures move in step as in a *pas de deux*, primarily backwards. Bellerophon leans back to power his pull on the horse's mouth, inside which are positioned the gripping fingers of his left hand. The point is his effort to bridle the horse; the hand in the mouth is the node of the forms, but not the visual center. The horse, forced back on his hind legs, is pawing the air as he resists. This secondary forward thrust appears also in Bellerophon's right arm, swinging a cudgel to beat the

horse. The forward-pushing limbs—this arm and the horse's forefeet—are at spatial edges of the work, to the front and at the right, while the backward-pushing forces interlock at its heart.

At first it seems strange that all this stress, with its sense of pulsing through present time, is offered in the purest of clean relief designs, much like Wedgwood in the way the smooth contours read against the blank environment. The form has been rightly understood as an homage to classical art, one of the main stimuli to the emergence of this art altogether. Yet the form is absent from Bertoldo's obvious ancient model, the *Horse-Tamers of the Quirinal*. Bertoldo is criticizing and correcting antiquity, not copying. In Washington the piece is admirably installed in front of a pale partition wall which reinforces the contour further and yet leaves space to walk behind the sculpture. What has not apparently been included in our understanding of this sculpture is that this diagrammatic kind of composing, quite unlike Bertoldo's other works, makes the same statement as the subject matter. Both are about taming, forcing centrifugal energies into a controlled system which will support civilization. Here the observer can fuse the two generally isolated concerns of art-historical scholarship, style analysis and iconography; what results is simply design analysis, as it is readily understood in art schools: the problem of the formal realization of a given theme. The strength of the contours makes another point as well, relating to the miniature scale basic to the work; whereas the primary actions could in themselves suggest something monumental, the horse has been tamed by compression.

If all this suggests what devotees find to like in small bronzes, the obscurity of the artist suggests some of the roadblocks that obstruct scholars who work on them. At least in Bertoldo's case we know the sculptor's and the subjects' names. We are less lucky with the marvelous figure that the catalogue labels a "Negro Venus" by an "Italian (?) second half of the sixteenth century." This standing figure shows constant,

fluid turning actions, in her body and in her asymmetrical arms; and the underplaying of the joints adds to the snakelike effect. Her body and limbs are, rather, like several snakes, yet they present a poised balance between the two sides, both in their masses and openings. At the top, on the long neck, the small head balances the similarly small feet, which insist with elegance on the artificiality of the figure's easy stance. The hands carry a small mirror and a cloth, suggesting a bathing motif. The Renaissance had no tradition of Venus as a black woman, but it did have one of black maidservants, including paintings in which they help their mistresses to bathe. One by Titian shows such a maid at the bath of Diana. If this statuette shows such a person, we would want to ask whether it is part of a group (not so likely) or whether a single figure from such a painting has been presented alone (which occasionally happens).

As to the artist, the catalogue rejects the opinion of many scholars that he was a Venetian sculptor called Danese Cattaneo. Danese's known works, it is said, are too large to justify comparison. This statement is puzzling, however, since small bronze reliefs are regularly treated as his in current study; presumably the cataloguer of this show rejects such claims but has no space to argue the matter. To me, Danese seems a plausible author, as does his talented pupil Campagna. If the artist was Campagna, this would account for the later fashions in style that the cataloguer believes to be present in the work.

All this suggests, rightly, that our knowledge of this art is in an early, muddled state. It is usually written about in forms that have so far seemed inadequate. One is the handbook, which is usually at the basic stage of "bronzes through the ages," allowing only a meager sketch of anything in particular. To be sure, when so little is known, that is not such a bad thing. The leading form is the catalogue of a collection, which is what we have in essence with the Vienna show. The museum-goer may be startled to see in the

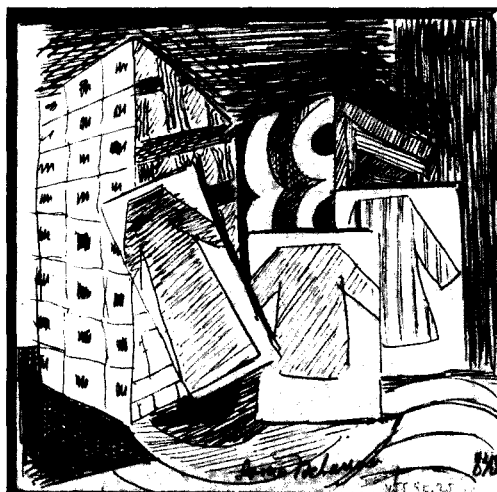
catalogue the vast amount of attention paid to old inventories of the collection, and to the problem of matching references in various inventories for works that were shipped around among castles. But this kind of attention is a legitimate means of answering primary questions. Small bronzes are, on the one hand, multiples, in that a model can produce several equally original bronze figures. On the other hand, the process of making these sculptures involved a lot of adjustments by hand, so that each bronze is somewhat different; they were often made years apart and by different people, and one is likely to be better than the rest. It is obviously hard to compare them now in different museums, with the limitations of photography for sculpture, especially for sculpture of this kind.

Understandably, scholars in this field have felt that they must begin with such issues—to know what there is—and so their studies have been narrow even when effective. There have also been many false starts. These scholarly limitations have been affected by, and have had an effect on, the world of collectors and on the market for such art. That kind of linkage is more readily understood in Europe, where learned professional journals carry dealer advertisements, as our medical journals do. Thus, much of the collecting of small bronzes has been of low intensity, a point not likely to be articulated. Their few devotees have rarely exhausted the market, and displays in American museums often reflect a policy of acquiring such works as substitutes for the monumental sculpture they would have preferred but which they found too rare or expensive.

The buyers of small bronzes have often been rightly worried (or wrongly not worried) that they had inferior examples, and that the verdict on a particular piece was hard to establish. Master prints below the greatest level have been collected in just this way. Even in Vienna the small-bronze collectors were not regularly Hapsburg kings or great potentates: by far the largest source for this show was a self-made immigrant banker from France who came to Vienna and pros-

pered in handling government finances. The museum bought his collection in 1808, when its role as a repository of history was emerging. Though this banker belongs in a line that goes from the early Medici to J. P. Morgan, he was certainly only a minor figure in it—the others collected much more than this. For them, as we can see in the Frick mansion today, or in the sixteenth-century private study of a Medici grand duke in Florence, the bronzes on tables or in wall niches are halfway between furniture and really important paintings: they add an opulence that is closer to art than furniture is, yet closer to ornamental luxury than major art is. Kings also used bronzes as diplomatic gifts to other kings. Like a Steuben crystal bowl given by a president today, a small bronze was admired for its great craft and cost, but it was ostentatiously useless.

If the history of small bronzes sounds discouraging, it may contain its own counterpoise. These sculptures may well have been among the first works of art to be considered primarily in an aesthetic way when they were made; thus, they may be considered the pioneers of vastly wider ranges of form in later times. Artists have always been able to use strange working conditions as jumping-off places, including jobs of making commonplace practical items (say, mass housing) or throwaways (say, theater programs). The uselessness can be a great help. The modernity of the bronzes is also strengthened by another factor that stimulated their emergence, the idea that ancient classical art was being re-created in them. As a result, they are usually on secular themes, which is ironic, since the ancient originals were usually made for religious rites. But a pagan rite was a secular and literary enjoyment in the Renaissance. The nudity of the figures, for the Renaissance an exhilarating assertion of the human ideal and the truth of nature, certainly helped to fill them with a greater energy than most works of their age. Museum visitors who come to the Renaissance section and say "But it's all Madonnas" are, even if naïve, complaining legitimately about the way the history is being



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documented, and the little bronzes can offset that as well.

Despite such advantages, the disadvantages of these sculptures have proved stronger in the end. The notion of them as not serious, as baubles, was surely always close to the surface. It is related to the big interest they manifest in figures of animals, something rare in sculpture, yet oddly prefiguring one of the main forms of bronzes in the nineteenth century. In the later part of this exhibition, the sense that virtuosity was the only needed thing seems suffocating. It is partly to be blamed on the spectacular Giovanni Bologna, who at the end of the sixteenth century is the last of the fully creative figures in the exhibition. His *Mercury*—seen here in one of its several versions—is without doubt the most famous of all works in the medium. As it stands on one toe to fly, it is a logo for much we want to express. Giambologna had such a command of technique, and such a security of firm figure modeling, that he can prevent us from rejecting empty virtuosity. But after him there is nothing else (except some relatively intelligent imitators), and we see a lot of it here, partly because the exhibition is also designed to show the history of the Vienna collection. This self-regard by curators is natural, but the emphasis it gets in exhibition programs at present seems to me disproportionate. Here, in works of sculptors

active in the seventeenth century in and near Austrian lands, we see an all too dignified presentation of art that has truly given in to being minor. One is a *Mercury and Psyche* whose notion was to quote simultaneously from two Giambolognas, the flying *Mercury* and the *Rape of the Sabine Woman*. He abducts her through the air. Most absurdly memorable is an equestrian statue of a prince, which is furnished with several alternative portrait heads, to be screwed on as occasion required. It is, to be sure, a perfect document of the mindless interchangeability of all those Rudolfs and Leopolds, the more so for being seriously intended, but it is hardly more.

Yet we cannot fault the curators too much; these are the excesses that accompany their achievements. We are getting to see this art much more clearly through their work. But if they are really successful, the next step should turn away from this procedure. The little bronzes need to be viewed also as an integral part of the art of their age: the general history of art needs to include them, for the sake of its own validity. It is a surprising context in which to find the lesson that segregation has never been equal. What these artists achieved was a variation on the theme of other artists; they clarify each other. We are now offered an opportunity to see how they do so, as has hardly ever been possible before.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

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Clement Greenberg in the Forties by *Hilton Kramer*

All in the family

by Bruce Bawer

A decade or so ago it would have been all but inconceivable for a young American writer to make his name with a collection of short stories. Yet when David Leavitt published *Family Dancing* two years ago, shortly after his graduation from Yale, the book's success was phenomenal: it received enthusiastic reviews, it sold briskly for several months at all the best bookstores, it was nominated for both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. Leavitt, who had previously published two stories in the *New Yorker*, one in *Harper's*, and one in *Prism*, was suddenly—to judge by the way everybody was talking about him—a Major American Literary Figure.

Yet the stories themselves were, by and large, exasperatingly commonplace. Through-out most of them Leavitt (who had written his first serious fiction scarcely three or four years earlier, as a member of Knopf editor Gordon Lish's workshop at Yale) adhered religiously to the rules of current literary fashion: the characters were flat, the prose dry and passionless, the plots jejune; the stories were preoccupied with surfaces, crowded with banal domestic details. What made this familiarity more disturbing than usual, however, was that Leavitt—as he demonstrated in his best stories, “Dedicated” and “Territory”—was capable of finer things. Above all, these two fresh and poignant stories revealed a remarkable sensitivity toward his characters that one wanted to see more

of. Oddly, it was in these same two stories that Leavitt dealt most overtly with the theme of homosexuality (which hovered in the background of several of the other stories); it was as if this subject, and none other, inspired Leavitt to write with feeling and originality.

Like most of the stories in *Family Dancing*, Leavitt's first novel, *The Lost Language of Cranes*,¹ is out to remind us how rare and difficult it is for people, whether friends or lovers or even members of the same family, to know and understand each other, and how wonderful it is when, if only for a brief moment, they make meaningful contact. The novel, like the stories, is about an educated upper-middle-class family under stress, its members out of touch with each other; as in “Territory,” the stress is caused primarily by the intrusion of homosexuality into the family circle. Like *Family Dancing*, then, the novel brings together two seemingly incompatible milieus—the family and the homosexual subculture—presenting us thereby with a world in which the paramount human ritual is not a young person's marriage but his “coming out” to his family, a world in which two very different kinds of love are continually striving for peaceful coexistence.

The book, alas, is founded upon a gimmick that might be more appropriate to a soap opera than to a serious novel. The

1 *The Lost Language of Cranes*, by David Leavitt; Knopf, 319 pages, \$17.95.

gimmick is this: unbeknownst to one another, both Owen Benjamin, the mild-mannered, middle-aged admissions director and English teacher at an exclusive Manhattan boys' school, and his bright, sensitive, twenty-five-year-old son Philip, an editor of romance novels, are homosexual. The son, who lives on the Upper West Side, is "out" to his friends and, after years of lonely awkwardness, has finally (he thinks) found true love with a wealthy young freelance copywriter named Eliot Abrams, and is ready to come out to his folks; the father—who, with his anomic wife, Rose, a copy editor for a small publishing house, is under the threat of losing his rent-stabilized East Side apartment in the co-op boom—has spent the last couple of decades secretly haunting homosexual porno theaters on Sunday afternoons. Though all three Benjamins (as well as many of the supporting characters) are professional communicators, all of them are to some degree alone, isolated, spiritually incommunicado. The novel, which follows this unusual family through a single winter, bids us wonder: What will happen when Philip comes out to his folks? Will Owen come out too? And *then* what? How will Rose (the sole heterosexual member of the clan) handle all this? Will the family grow closer or shatter completely?

Given this contrived premise, it is surprising how effective parts of the novel are. Leavitt is particularly good at evoking the desperation of loneliness, the joy of achieving a human connection, the small private agony of failing to. Certain episodes along these lines—for instance, Philip's two nocturnal visits with a friend from college and Owen's pathetic phone call to a stranger—are unusually affecting. (The latter episode causes one to feel genuine sorrow, pity, and embarrassment—emotions in which, along with fear and panic, Leavitt seems at times to specialize.) The pictures of Manhattan life are realistic, what with the constant talk of rents and sublets and apartment availability; and the title—whose meaning is explained in a brief chapter near the middle of the book—proves to be nicely allusive. As

for Leavitt's prose, it is lucid, graceful, and free of affectation; though sometimes he appears to be on the verge of descending into the detail-heavy insipidness of *Family Dancing*, he rarely in fact does so.

Philip, the book's central figure, is Leavitt's most convincing creation by far. Like the protagonists of "Territory" and "Dedicated," he is a likable and touching figure, openly romantic, even childlike, in his affections; he is also (like one or two earlier Leavitt characters) outrageously insecure and self-analytical, inclined to speechify about how he feels, to ask his friends and parents how they feel about how he feels, and to explain thereupon how he feels about how they feel about how he feels. (Leavitt, fortunately, does not fail to see the humor in this.) In particular, he is burdened by an overwhelming compulsion to broadcast his sexual orientation to the world and longs for the world to smile upon his acceptance of it. He is also nostalgic, and some of his memories of childhood (as well as his musings about them) feel so real that one cannot believe them to be otherwise; the delicate and honest perceptiveness of these passages is very special. That it is impossible not to identify Philip with his creator does not mitigate the skill with which Leavitt brings him to life.

This is, then, a novel of considerable virtues. Despite them, however, it has significant—and, alas, all but crippling—weaknesses. Its presiding consciousness, for instance, is characterized by a callow naïveté which—though rather appealing when viewed in the light of the typical homosexual novel, with its jaded grubbiness—cannot but be viewed as a substantial failing. There are numerous structural problems as well. Leavitt includes no fewer than four full-dress coming-out episodes (plus several other episodes in which characters simply talk about how they came out). He devotes a good deal of attention to the development of a subplot involving Eliot's adoptive father—a children's writer whose gentle fantasy stories Philip adored in his childhood—and then drops it without warning; he does the

same with the Benjamins' apartment crisis. Nor does he find much for Rose to do besides roam the streets of Manhattan and the rooms of her apartment thinking dark thoughts. Indeed, both Rose and Owen are less convincing than Philip, and their relationships with each other and with their son feel synthetic.

But the book's most significant failing is that the gimmick at its center never stops feeling like a gimmick. The fact that these two homosexuals are father and son doesn't help us to understand either of them better, and doesn't serve to tie their stories together in any significant way. (Nor does it pay off in an explosive reversal or an illuminating climax.) For the most part, Philip and Owen might as well be total strangers inhabiting different novels. Of course, this is Leavitt's whole point—Philip and Owen *are* worlds apart, and he wants us to recognize how tragic (but true to life) it is that a father and son can go for a quarter of a century without seeing an essential part of each other, without recognizing a common bond. Yet the novel doesn't dramatize this tragedy effectively: aside from the fact that Leavitt fails to draw a clear picture of Philip and Owen's relationship, one is simply too aware of the gimmick *qua* gimmick to be moved by it. (And one is uncomfortably aware, as well, that the whole thing reads like a homosexual wish-fulfillment fantasy—for what could make a homosexual young man, eager for unreserved parental acceptance and approval, happier than the notion that his father too is a homosexual, and an even more mixed-up one than himself?)

What *Family Dancing* suggested, and what *The Lost Language of Cranes* unfortunately affirms, is that David Leavitt is a fine young writer who labors under a severe and singular set of limitations. He is at his best when writing about homosexuals (especially young ones), at his worst when trying to create convincing heterosexuals; but he's not willing to be just a writer of "gay lit," a supplier of fiction to the homosexual community. He wants to show homosexuals and heterosexuals in contact, wants in fact, it

sometimes seems, to justify the ways of one to the other; Leavitt leaves the impression that some part of him truly believes that if homosexual children can persuade their parents to accept them without reservation then somehow the natural drawbacks and frustrations of homosexual life—and perhaps even the essential isolation of human existence itself—can be vanquished. One hopes that such matters will eventually cease to weigh so heavily upon his mind, and that he will in time prove capable of broader interests and sympathies.

Louise Erdrich too is a choreographer of family life, acutely aware of the impediments to mutual understanding and acceptance that families face. Erdrich, a half-German-American, half-Chippewa writer whose first novel, *Love Medicine*, won the 1985 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, has now written a second novel, *The Beet Queen*,² which resembles its predecessor not only in its preoccupation with family but also in a number of other ways. Like *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen* consists of a series of alternating first- and third-person chapters; it has several protagonists of equal prominence, all of them friends, neighbors, or relatives of one another, most of them bearing exotic names like Sita Kozka and Wallace Pfef; and it is steeped in the grotesqueries of rural Roman Catholicism and twentieth-century Chippewa mysticism, and, above all, in the stark atmosphere of the North Dakota prairie (an atmosphere reminiscent, in some ways, of *Winesburg, Ohio*). Some of the characters in *The Beet Queen* even appeared previously in *Love Medicine*. But there are some welcome differences between the two books. In *Love Medicine*, the chapters jumped around chronologically, from 1981 to 1934 to 1948 and so forth, and never seemed to find a center. The characters, furthermore, were dull and unvaried, their voices indistinguishable from one another, their outrageous antics ultimately monotonous and predict-

2 *The Beet Queen*, by Louise Erdrich; Henry Holt, 338 pages, \$16.95.

able. In *The Beet Queen* these flaws have been remedied to some extent: aside from the welcome fact that its chapters are in chronological order, the book has focus, it has warmth, its characters are engaging and distinctive; although it is in its own way as outrageous as *Love Medicine*, the outrageousness seems to be brought into play with greater discrimination.

The story begins in 1932. Abandoned by their widowed mother, Mary and Karl Adare, aged eleven and fourteen respectively, journey by boxcar from Minneapolis to their aunt's hometown of Argus, North Dakota. Upon their arrival in Argus, a dog chases them, and the children run in different directions—Mary heading toward her aunt's house, and Karl hopping back on the moving freight train. As a result of this chance canine encounter, Mary and Karl do not see each other again for twenty years. They spend most of their lives apart—she growing up in Argus, a sexless homebody, and he becoming a promiscuous, rootless traveling salesman. Yet their seemingly antithetical lives are alike in their emptiness and loneliness; profoundly wounded by their mother's abandonment, both Mary and Karl find it impossible to trust, to love. They are not, to be sure, the only abandoned or solitary souls in *The Beet Queen*. Mary's vain, pretentious cousin Sita Kozka, her good-hearted bachelor neighbor Wallace Pfef, and her friend Celestine James—all of whose lives are as central to this novel as Karl's and Mary's—are likewise, in their different ways, the victims of rejection or isolation or unrequited love, and, as their lives proceed, the abandonments and frustrations multiply apace.

Erdrich brings these individuals to life with extraordinary facility. Yet the book's structure, though more effective than that of *Love Medicine*, is troublesome. Erdrich thinks less like a novelist, in terms of gradual character development over a relatively long period of time, than like a short-story writer. *The Beet Queen*, accordingly, consists mostly of self-contained, tightly organized chapters—each focused upon a single character, each

charting a single course of action, and each building to its own climax. (Indeed, many of them have been published as short stories in periodicals, including *Ms.*, *The American Voice*, *Formations*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Kenyon*, *New England*, *Georgia*, and *Paris* reviews.) Most of them center upon epiphanies in the lives of their principal characters; the recognitions and reversals follow one another at a breathtaking clip, with the ten or twenty years between each character's successive appearances omitted as mere chaff. Erdrich patently operates upon the assumption that people do not change gradually but abruptly, and that every human life can thus be handily summarized in four or five intensely dramatic key episodes.

In accordance with this vision of the human condition, Erdrich's characters are the sort who make sudden resolutions following traumatic incidents and stick to them forever. After climbing back into that boxcar in Argus, for instance, Karl (in one of the book's most moving episodes) seeks affection and comfort in the arms of a young vagrant, only to be rejected, and silently vows "not to cry on the lap of anyone again"; a few years later, Mary, having been similarly spurned by one Russell Kashpaw, makes a fateful vow of her own: "I would never go out of my way for romance again. Romance would have to go out of its way for me." They are, moreover, the sort of characters who know with absolute certainty things that in real life no one could possibly know for certain. For instance, after an intimate liaison with Wallace Pfef at a Minneapolis farm-equipment convention, thirty-four-year-old Karl knows from Pfef's "stricken" stare that "if I wanted I could have him for life." The world according to Louise Erdrich is, in short, a decidedly melodramatic one; Mary and Karl's mother does not just run off—she flies away at a Minneapolis carnival with a barnstorming pilot she has never met before.

The positive side of this approach to the novel is that it produces a crisp and lively book, a book as dense with plot twists as

Raiders of the Lost Ark; the negative side is that we end up feeling that we don't know the characters nearly as well as we'd like to. The chapters concerning Karl, for instance, present us in turn with several different incarnations—a shy and sweet adolescent, a slick and cynical thirty-year-old salesman, and so forth—without showing him developing from one stage to the next. Clearly we are meant to understand that it is his mother's abandonment of him that makes him cynical; but not to *show* this sweet boy losing his sweetness, month by month and year by year, is to refuse to use the form of the novel to its best advantage. It is, indeed, to refuse to write a novel, *per se*.

Yet there is a unifying idea here. Much as Leavitt keeps us wondering whether the barriers will come down between the embattled Benjamins, so Erdrich teases us with the question of whether any members of the Adare family will ever be permanently reunited, whether in fact any of the novel's principals will leave behind the sad and traumatic past, put an end to the relentless cycle of abandonment, and take up the burden of loving and being loved. Over the years, one opportunity after another for reunion presents itself. But it is not until the closing chapters of the book, set in 1972, that the suspense is relieved. Erdrich's deft weaving together of the novel's plot strands in these brief closing chapters proves to be audacious, coincidence-heavy, and ultimately quite affecting—a *sui generis* mixture of the tender and the absurd, the realistic and the magical.

For magic is a major theme in *The Beet Queen*. In her first novel, Erdrich's characters, unable to "get love right," sought to secure it by means of an Indian potion, a "love medicine." In *The Beet Queen*, Mary—a devotee of fortune tellers, palm readers, psychics, yarrow sticks, Tarot cards, and Ouija boards—is touched by magic. On a memorable night in her early twenties, she awakens to find her hands glowing; on a winter day in her childhood, when she smashes face first into the ice on the Argus school grounds, the nuns see the resulting pattern

on the ice as the face of Jesus and announce a "miracle"; Mary, for her part, sees it as the face of Karl, whom she loves and misses. Later in the novel Wallace identifies Karl (who has abandoned him as well as Mary) not with Jesus but with Satan. Meaning what? Perhaps, simply enough, that we are all part Jesus and part Satan, able to embrace or spurn our fellow man, and that our challenge in life is to act in accordance with the best that is in us. Certainly a reverence for the everlasting possibility of redemption, of human communion, is at the heart of Erdrich's novel. Like David Leavitt, she places great value upon both romantic and familial bonds, recognizes how delicate they are and how easily damaged, and celebrates the enduring love and the qualities of character that make their renewal possible.

Enchantment, a first outing by Daphne Merkin,³ is not a novel so much as it is—in the diplomatic words of Walker Percy's jacket blurb—a "remarkable memoir, fictional or not." And actually it's not even a memoir so much as it is 288 pages of whining about what torture it is to be a spoiled rich brat who grew up in a huge, well-appointed Manhattan apartment and a Long Island summer house (complete with swimming pool), with a laundress, a cook, a nurse, and a chauffeur at her beck and call, and a charge account at Bloomingdale's from the age of fifteen. There's no story here, just a jumbled collection of memories that reads like a transcript of several marathon sessions on the psychiatrist's couch; and there aren't any real characters, either, for our narrator's parents, siblings, servants, and classmates—not to mention the clerks who wait on her at Bloomingdale's and the women she chats with at fund-raising dinners at the Waldorf—exist in this book only insofar as their lives touch upon hers. Hannah Lehmann—for such is the name that Merkin gives her heroine—has no interest in other people as separate individuals, with

3 *Enchantment*, by Daphne Merkin; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 288 pages, \$16.95.

lives and thoughts and feelings unrelated to her own, and neither apparently does Merkin.

About Hannah: she's twenty-six years old, one of the six children of two German Orthodox Jews; her father, Walter, is a kind, indulgent, rather distant Wall Street stockbroker and her mother, Margot, is (Hannah keeps telling us) cruel and neglectful. Indeed, Margot's purported cruelty and neglect—and Hannah's inability, at the same time, to stop loving her, to break free from her—are the principal themes of *Enchantment*: "The enchantment I am under is stifling, a witch's cloak. My mother is the Wicked Witch, but she is also the object of desire. She is the first I have known of love—of the deception of love. I don't believe the world is any different away from her." The evidence of Margot's witchery is formidable: when Hannah was a little girl Margot made her skate at the Wollman Rink in Central Park (with all the Puerto Ricans!) rather than at Rockefeller Center. And then (shades of Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar*) there was the time that Margot took Hannah to Lord & Taylor and bought her a plain gray wool coat that made her look like a doorman. No wonder that, "[a]fter I learned about the Nazis in detail . . . I decided that my mother had been Ilse Koch, chief female S.S. officer at Auschwitz, before she married my father."

In reality, Hannah's mother appears to be a more or less typical mother of the German-Jewish variety—possessive but emotionally undemonstrative, generous but given to occasional (and extremely mild) acts of thrift. She loves and cares about Hannah but has five other children and other things in her life—and it is for this that Hannah is unable to forgive her. Hannah wants a perfect love—which, to this spoiled rich girl, means complete, undivided attention; she wants a mother, in other words, who is a mother and nothing else. In her psychiatrist's office she imagines *his* mother, "sweet but negligible, standing over a hot stove and stirring soup—the mother I always wanted. With a mother like that, who couldn't take on the future?" Later she tells Margot:

"Maybe you're not simple enough to be a good mother." Hannah likes putting Margot down like that.

"The world doesn't revolve around you," Margot tells Hannah at one point. But this whole novel testifies to Hannah's inability to accept this proposition. Nothing interests her—not geography, not books, not the people she passes on the street—unless she can relate it, in some way, to herself, to her own feelings. Merkin, to be sure, is aware that her heroine's view of things is less than perfectly objective. She knows Hannah has a problem; Hannah knows Hannah has a problem. (Why else has she been going to a psychiatrist since the age of eleven?) And yes, there *is* some intentional irony here and there in this good-sized book. But there's not anywhere near as much of it as there should be. Merkin seems really to believe that Hannah is suffering—indeed, that she has experienced a variety of pain that those of us who *aren't* rich Jewish girls will never know. As she puts it, "To people without money, all other griefs run a distant second, and even craziness can seem a luxury." In other words, only rich people really know what it feels like to *feel*. And Merkin means it! Oh, those lucky poor people—since her teens, Hannah has been consumed by envy (a patronizing envy, to be sure) for them:

If I were poor, my mother would stand on the fire escape in summer, and everyone for miles around would see what she was doing to me, that she had absorbed me like a sponge, made it so there was no "away" away from her. But my mother never wore rollers in her hair or walked around in bedroom slippers outside as though the world were her home. No pock-faced, leather-jacketed boy ever lounged against the neighborhood stoop and said, "Your old lady's crazy, isn't she?" Outside her own home you couldn't tell much about her.

And again:

Money, I felt, even before I knew it, wasn't the issue [in the Lehmann home], the way it was in *Little Women* or *Five Little Peppers*. What was

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missing was less clear-cut but no less impoverishing: some allowance for the spill of our personalities, the clamor of distinctive selves—a turf for each of us to stake out, mess up, tack drawings to the wall of, declare *Mine*. When I saw the rooms of friends, I became conscious of a difference, the voice they had been given in the choice of a ruffled bedspread, a white and gold desk. But it is not until I am grown up, when I will have friends with children of their own, that I am struck by the thought that what was absent from the rooms my siblings and I slept in was, simply, us.

Hannah envies not only poor urbanites but middle-American *shiksas*, though she takes it for granted that their lives are dull and mindless: “The opposite of terror [i.e., Hannah’s life] is blandness—a snub-nosed girl from Dayton, Ohio, who regards her family with the same lack of guile with which she regards the sky when it is blue.” The models whose photographs she examines while getting her hair done on Madison Avenue are “women with names like Kelly

and Dawn, who come from tiny towns in Texas and Washington, who are tall and thin, and who don’t appear to be burdened by any pasts to speak of.” Sure, nobody has a past except Hannah; no one *feels* except her; everybody’s a stereotype. What’s ironic is that she herself, though her author doesn’t seem to realize it for a minute, is the stereotype to end all stereotypes. For what Merkin has written here is one long Jewish-princess joke:

Bloomingdale’s always makes me lonely: all the choices, so many possible ways to look, everything requiring an output of energy, a core of solid conviction—*This gray sweatshirt is me*. Nothing I buy can’t be bought or worn by thousands of other people . . .

It is almost embarrassing to have arrived in my mid-twenties from a background of no visible hardship and not to have seen Italy. “Italy!” people say. “How can you skip Italy? How is it possible *you* haven’t been to Italy?”

Enchantment is, of course, like *The Lost Language of Cranes* and *The Beet Queen*, concerned above all else with families, with the things that drive them apart and the things that, after all is said and done, bring them back together again. "Families are all there is," Hannah overhears one woman say to another on the Central Park West bus. "Families are monstrous," she muses while crossing Central Park in a taxi, "but without them there is no one to tell you not to go into Central Park at night." Like Leavitt and Erdrich, Merkin is preoccupied with the theme of alienation—"Why is it that we get our first taste of isolation within families?"—and with the realization that "families are a secret." Yet *Enchantment*, unlike Leavitt's and Erdrich's novels, is not only informed by personal experience; it seems to consist of nothing *but* personal experience. One keeps waiting for a sign that Merkin is aware of the impression she's making, for a switch, perhaps, to another narrator (Margot or Walter or even one of the other children), for some escape from the claustrophobic solipsism of Hannah Lehmann. But there is no escape. Certainly no "novel" has ever appeared to be more blatantly confessional. Yet one hesitates to commit oneself to the statement that *Enchantment* is an autobiography in disguise, for the simple reason that it seems incredible that anyone could really write and publish so shamelessly narcissistic a document; surely, one thinks, this book must be a pure piece of invention, an ingenious attempt on Daphne Merkin's part to capture the workings of a self-obsessed Jewish princess's mind. But to what conceivable purpose?

And yet, for all this, *Enchantment* is far from unreadable. For one thing, even in the present era of "happy-talk" news programs, tell-all movie-star autobiographies, and late-night talk shows, you don't get to see such pure, unabashed egocentrism very often; in this regard, Merkin's book is gruesomely fascinating—a tour de force of a decidedly unliterary sort. For another thing, the book is so sumptuously written that, ridiculous as it is, many a reader is likely to stick with it to

the end simply in order to enjoy the music of Merkin's prose. It is dismaying to see such promising gifts squandered on what may well be the most inane book of the year.

Peter Taylor was writing about families long before Merkin and her contemporaries were gleams in their fathers' eyes. Indeed, though many a celebrated writer of his generation (he was born in 1917) has tended to take the family for granted and to confront flashier subjects, Taylor's wonderful short stories—many of which were collected in *The Old Forest and Other Stories*, last year's PEN/Faulkner Award winner—have consistently demonstrated a preoccupation with the relations of parents and children, and have examined those relations with insight and sympathy. Taylor has, moreover, provided in his prose a model of tautness, purity, and elegance; so restrained and rigorous, as a matter of fact, is his writing that a reader unfamiliar with his work—especially one who has recently been exposed, say, to the free-wheeling confessional manner of a Daphne Merkin, say, or to David Leavitt's grab bag of subplots and minor characters—may well feel constricted, suffocated. This is, as it happens, an utterly appropriate response to Taylor's fiction, for the fine, well-to-do Southern families of his stories are often confining families, subtle dictatorships whose younger members, though they may travel far from home to make their lives, can never completely break the bonds of enchantment. Quite frequently, then, in the world of Peter Taylor, you can't help but go home again—and again, and again—in one sense or another.

Yet Taylor's perspective upon this state of affairs is as different as it could be from Daphne Merkin's. He is a supremely objective writer, whose stories, though they are doubtless grounded in profoundly felt and comprehended personal experience, are at the same time exquisitely shaped aesthetic objects—pure fictions; even when he writes in the first person, there is little temptation to identify him with his narrator. This is the case with his first novel in thirty-six years,

A Summons to Memphis,⁴ which tells the story of a middle-aged Manhattan editor named Phillip Carver, whose two sisters call him back home to Tennessee to help thwart their widowed father's plans to remarry. After informing the reader of the summons, Phillip attempts to fill in the background on his "old-fashioned family," with an eye to explaining how they managed to stay so old-fashioned, why he and his sisters are all unmarried, why his sisters are so eager to destroy the old man's chance at happiness. It all goes back, Phillip explains, to the single event, way back in his early teens, which changed not only his life but the lives of all the Carvers: the betrayal—and, almost, the financial ruin—of his father, a prominent Nashville attorney, by his father's best friend and principal client, a Mr. Lewis Shackleford.

Betrayal, it should be noted, is a favorite theme of Taylor's. In his story "First Heat," a naïve young politician suffers his "baptism of betrayal," and learns how to forsake his own principles; in "Miss Leonora When Last Seen," a retired spinster schoolteacher is betrayed by her former students, now members of the town school board, who sue to condemn her house and build a new school on her property. If the theme of betrayal is often present in Taylor's work, it is indubitably because betrayal represents, to him, a forsaking of "old-fashioned" virtues—honor, loyalty, moral rectitude—for the modern values of expediency, self-interest, "progress" at any price; to him, betrayal manifestly symbolizes the moral price that twentieth-century humanity pays for its life of convenience and comfort.

Mr. Carver being a man of old-fashioned virtue, his reaction to Lewis Shackleford's betrayal was dignified and decisive: he quietly removed his entire family from Nashville to Memphis, breaking off all rela-

tions with Shackleford and all connections with his Nashville career. Though his career recovered splendidly, his family, alas, did not; on the contrary, the move had a devastating lifelong effect upon all the Carvers. The reason for this, according to Phillip, resides in the differences between the two cities. Nashville, he explains, is a more genteel city than Memphis; its "best" families participate in horse shows, fox hunting, serious literary evenings, and formal dinner parties, whereas Memphis is a place of golf games, card parties, and "hotel society." Memphians are offended by "Nashville pretension"; Nashvilleans look down upon Memphians' lack of ambition. (For example, the typical Memphis parents of Alex Mercer, Phillip's friend since childhood, "were convinced that any deviation from what they considered the Memphis norm, any eccentricity or any excellence of any kind amounted only to exhibitionism.") In short, "Memphis was today. Nashville was yesterday. Mother was willing to forget Nashville. Father wished to live Nashville in Memphis." What had once been a cohesive family, then, and an integral part of Nashville society, became in Memphis a house that was both divided against itself and set apart from the city around it. Phillip's mother, for instance, having gained "a kind of personal liberation for which she was not prepared and of which she did not know how to make an advantage," was no longer able to play "her role in the family unit":

[F]rom the day we arrived in Memphis it seemed she never under any circumstances had any sense of what was fitting or any feeling of responsibility with regard to the role of a mother in an old-fashioned family like ours. She continued to be affectionate with each of us individually but any idea of the family or of herself as mother seemed as meaningless to her as all the silly debutantism that her daughters had to go through and the life in the business world that Father was caught up in.

Soon after the move to Memphis, indeed, Phillip's mother stopped wearing her day-

4 *A Summons to Memphis*, by Peter Taylor; Knopf, 209 pages, \$15.95. The Taylor stories mentioned here may be found in *The Collected Stories of Peter Taylor* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), *In the Miro District and Other Stories* (Knopf), and *The Old Forest and Other Stories* (Dial).

time clothing and became a virtual hermit. Similarly, Phillip's sisters, Josephine and Betsy, were frozen by the move "in the roles of eternal young ladies." As for Phillip himself, who as a boy wanted to be a poet, the move meant a kind of death of the soul.

This is, at least, the way Phillip sees things—or claims to. Yet there are significant, and disquieting, inconsistencies in his testimony. On page five he says that his family is not "a genuine Memphis family," having lived there (as of his mother's death two years before) "only thirty years." Rather, they are a "Nashville family." But he later mentions (on page 176, to be exact) that the Carvers had in reality resided in Nashville for only six years, having moved there from the small (and fictitious) Tennessee town of Thornton. Even the statement that they'd lived in Memphis for thirty years is contradicted on page seventeen, where Phillip states that the family moved to Memphis "[m]ore than forty years ago." (It should be added that Phillip dates the move in 1931—which leaves some question as to when the "present" of this novel is supposed to be.) Phillip's liberal use throughout the novel of the words "of course"—sometimes four or five times per page—becomes an irritating tic, but it seems to be, on Taylor's part, an intentional one, designed to point up the fact that we cannot take anything that Phillip tells us for granted. He is self-deceptive and therefore unreliable; behind his seemingly clear-eyed view of things lies a more comprehensive truth of which we can get only occasional glimpses. But some facts do become plain. We come to realize, most importantly, that the sad fates of Phillip, his mother, and his sisters have less to do with the move to Memphis, per se, than with the fact that Lewis Shackelford's betrayal turned Phillip's father into a heartless tyrant whose family was incapable of challenging his power in any constructive way. Over the course of the novel Phillip comes to accept some—if not all—of these truths.

Like Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, then, *A Summons to Memphis* is a domestic tale of jealousy and betrayal, a tale many of

whose most important details the book's seemingly sensible and civilized narrator manages to ignore or to misconstrue, and whose ultimate lessons he largely fails to perceive. But the book is more reminiscent of Taylor's own work than it is of any other writer's. For instance, the story "Dean of Men," which is told in the first person, concerns a middle-aged academic (who has much in common with Phillip Carver's English-professor friend Alex Mercer) whose well-born, prosperous, and highly principled father (a businessman) and grandfather (a politician active in Tennessee state government) were both betrayed by friends and consequently became embittered tyrants. A passage in which the father's disloyal crony fails three times in succession to come to town by train to explain his shady dealings reappears, in essentially the same form, in *A Summons to Memphis*. In the novel, as in the story, the narrator compromises with his ambitions but not with his principles, and the father and his treacherous friend are reconciled in their very old age—the point being that, though people are indeed capable of corruption, "[a] man must go on living among men."

Likewise, earlier versions of Alex Mercer and Phillip Carver may be found in the story "Daphne's Lover"; Phillip's trip home—and his father's cruel domination—are foreshadowed in "At the Drugstore"; and the novel's use of Memphis and Nashville as the backdrop for a quarrel between two public men is prefigured in "The Captain's Son." *A Summons to Memphis* echoes a host of Taylor's best stories, furthermore, in its depiction of life as a patchwork of unexamined memories, unarticulated feelings, and repressed desires, of moral compromises that people are incapable of acknowledging even to themselves, and of thoughts and statements and actions that are emotionally authentic if logically inexplicable. The novel suggests, as do many of Taylor's stories, that to live in a family is to be forever a child, to some extent, tortured repeatedly by a child's conflicts and guilts, regrets and resentments, and that maturity means being will-

ing to let go, as fully as possible, of these preoccupations, and to attempt to live with one's family as amicably as one is capable of doing. And finally, *A Summons to Memphis* is consistent with Taylor's earlier work in its quiet but forceful affirmation that, in a world obsessed with fashion, with newness, with revolution for its own sake, there are certain timeless values that are worth pre-

serving—indeed, that without a sincere and fervent faith in the vital importance of those values, there can be no such thing as a civilized life. To Peter Taylor, in other words, the writing of fiction is a moral act—and he brings to it a reverence for language, for the art of narrative, and for the human spirit that many of his younger colleagues would do very well to emulate.

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Doomed poet

by David Paul

A poet's correspondence ought to have a special interest, a superior quality—or so we tend to feel. And yet how often does great poetry go with great letter writing? One thinks of Byron, whose letters, for most of us, amount to something more than his poetry. But then Keats's letters stay with us, lodge in the memory just as much as the best of his poetry. Goethe, I believe, is famous for his beautiful letters, unread and unreadable by me. But then, once German poets are mentioned, Rilke comes to mind as the most dedicated letter writer of them all. In his case, to an even greater degree than with Keats, whose passion and strength of feeling he cannot emulate, Rilke's letters are a cocoon for his sensibilities. A typical letter of Rilke is meant to reward the recipient and to ward him off, in equal degrees—to secure distance and a certain carefully judged intimacy at the same time.

What is it that makes for, that *creates*, the starkness of contrast between the letters of such poets and those of Charles Baudelaire? A recent edition of Baudelaire's letters, published by the University of Chicago Press, gives us some clues.¹ The differences are not of temperament or personality—or rather these count for very little compared with the material difference of circumstances. Rilke and Keats both had private incomes, modest

enough in the case of the latter but sufficient or more than sufficient to remove any immediate cares about the financial future; whereas Baudelaire's entire career was tormented and riddled with daily anxiety and worry about money, about how to make ends meet, how to raise a modest sum on written work yet to be completed, how to counter a pressing demand for payment on a debt by incurring a further debt in a different quarter. Throughout the twenty-odd years of his writing life, the spells of relief from the nightmare of money worries can only have been brief and illusory.

Baudelaire's own father had died at age sixty-eight in 1827, when the boy was barely six years old. His mother remarried in the following year, her bridegroom this time a military man, Lieutenant Colonel Jacques Aupick. The stepfather, assuming parental responsibilities, took over the choice of schooling for the boy, and in later years Baudelaire commented with hatred on how disastrous this was. He was never happy at any of his schools, though his schoolboy letters show him anxious to please, and even to like his stepfather. Both were to prove impossible tasks. Finally, in 1839, after three years at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, he was expelled, which put an end to his formal education at the age of eighteen. On reaching his majority at twenty-one, he came into a patrimony of a hundred thousand francs from his late father's estate. He had not long before returned from a sea voyage (paren-

1 *The Selected Letters of Charles Baudelaire*, translated and edited by Rosemary Lloyd. University of Chicago Press, 268 pages, \$24.95.

tally devised to take him away from the charms and temptations of city life), which he cut short at Mauritius instead of the intended destination of Calcutta.

Once at home and in command of his own small fortune, he began to spend it at a rate which filled his mother with alarm; and within two years, with the help and advice of her husband, and as a result of a family council, Charles's modest fortune was sequestered in perpetuity by means of a Conseil Judiciaire, the appointed trustee of which would pay Charles a tiny pension at fixed intervals. Now, whatever the dictates of prudence might be from the parents' point of view, it seems it was impossible for them to see the cruelty and stupidity, and the lifelong grinding sense of *humiliation*, which their pious intentions inflicted on their youthful victim. The following year he even attempted suicide, so hopeless did he feel his victimization to be. And in 1861 he could write to his mother:

I implore you, think of the Conseil Judiciaire! It has been devouring me for seventeen years. You have never been able to believe or understand the evil it has done me from every point of view. What I say may be offensive to your own idea of the matter. In any case it is, for the moment, irremediable.

It was to remain irremediable for the five-year moment of life still left to him. And at his death, more than a quarter of his small fortune still remained untouched with the trustee.

A letter to his friend and part-time publisher, Poulet-Malassis, written in 1861, gives us the nightmarish pattern of his days:

I want to add a word or two, the sort of thing I can say to you alone. For a long time now I've been on the brink of suicide. What holds me back has nothing to do with cowardice or even regret. It's my sense of pride, which prevents me leaving my affairs in a mess. *I'll leave enough to pay my debts.* For the last two months in particular I've fallen into an alarming listlessness and despair. I've felt myself attacked by

the kind of illness Gérard [de Nerval] had, that is, the fear of being incapable either of thinking, or of writing a single line My debt . . . it's constantly increasing, and at far too fast a rate. But I return incessantly to my obsession, that of letting the debt lie by paying regular interest. Do you know that every two months, or two and a half months, I have a flood of errands, a forced dilapidation of time and money, a palpitation of all my will power, a real anguish every time I turn a door handle? Moreover this debt, which I incurred essentially to install myself at Honfleur, now prevents me from doing so, as I have to be in Paris, and always on my guard.

General Aupick had died in the spring of 1857, and his widow had moved to a small house on the coast at Honfleur. She wanted her son to join her there, and Baudelaire certainly felt that this could be a heaven-sent refuge and change for him, if only his finances would give him peace and quiet to do his real work. But this was simply never to be. Disappointments, failures, and debts, debts, debts were to continue their relentless pursuit. And there was always his mother to continue her forlorn litany of laments and reproaches, and total failure to understand. Why couldn't dear Charles be *respectable* and prosperous, like some of the very best writers? As a lonely widow, like many another at the time, she naturally found comfort in the friendship and counsels of her curé, to whom she naturally confided her worries about her son. At the curé's request, Charles sent him a precious copy of the deluxe edition of *Les Paradis artificiels*—which the priest, after due consideration, ceremonially burned.

It is easy to dismiss some of the poet's later ventures toward furthering his career as rash and ridiculous: his candidature for election to the Académie, for instance. How was that haven of staid respectability to be expected to open its gates to the poet whose chief claim to literary distinction was based on a book notoriously banned? The whole exploit was clearly based on desperation—a wish to please his mother, a forlorn convic-

tion that his work had *real* merit, far exceeding the work of the academic elect. In retrospect, the irony is that nearly all the names of the important academicians whom he canvassed for votes—Lamartine, Viennet, Legouvé, Sandeau—are forgotten or of far less account now than that of the forlorn and ridiculous applicant, to whom a number of the most “important” members of the Académie refused even to open their doors. Such being the reactions of the Immortals, as they are still nicknamed with just a hint of seriousness, it’s hardly surprising that Baudelaire gave up his electoral campaign after eight weeks or so: a very brief business compared with what some other writers have made of it, including Paul Valéry.

By this time, Baudelaire was developing a conviction that his native country had become his natural enemy. Everyone in France, he declares in one of his notebooks, bore an ever-increasing resemblance to Voltaire! It was this that drove him to the idea that Belgium, a neighbor country whose principal language was French, might prove a kindlier and more rewarding audience for his work. His plan was to deliver readings of and lectures on his own works and those of some of his eminent contemporaries: a sound and interesting proposition in itself. But everything would depend on the size and the responses of the hoped-for audiences, and these proved tiny and negative. And the whole exploit, much longer than his venture on academe, virtually consumed the last two years of his life.

Along with two other French poets, Villon and Rimbaud, Baudelaire offers us a peculiarly individual challenge: in all three cases it is a challenge to identify with their lot, their fate being inalienable from their genius. Rimbaud in his *Lettre du Voyant* defines the terrors of the lot of the Seer Poet, a role which he had chosen for himself. Villon was haunted by the threat of the rope, or the cold hell of the underground dungeon. It was in response to his study of Baudelaire’s poetry, life, and career, and to his closer experience of the character and fate of Rimbaud, that Verlaine was prompted

to create the concept of the “poète damné,” the doomed poet, an apt enough symbol and title which leaves open the question of to what extent the poet’s fate is a matter of choice, and whether it is equally a matter of being chosen.

Of the three poets, Baudelaire is perhaps the least difficult to identify with; after all, his career was typically that of the never quite successful literary man, constantly driven to one money-catching chore after another—translating, reviewing, writing a labored critique of the annual offerings of paintings at the Salon. But behind the miseries and despairs of the years that followed the suppression of *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857, there was a steady creative drive, a strengthening of the poet’s skill in a whole series of new poems. In the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, no less than thirty-five poems out of a total of about a hundred and thirty are completely new to the volume. Many of these new additions are among the finest and most memorable of the poet’s output. And besides this, many of the poems already existing in the 1857 edition have been radically strengthened and transformed. One needs to keep this in mind while traversing the daily, dreary landscape of the letters.

The present selection of Baudelaire’s letters can be divided into two groups: those to his mother, and those to his friends, cronies, enemies, and business acquaintances. Of the second group many appear here for the first time in English translations. A virtually complete edition of the poet’s letters to his mother, in Arthur Symonds’s fine and spontaneous translation, appeared much earlier in this century. The same terms don’t quite apply to the present English versions. As will be seen from the quotations given here, they have a certain pallor as well as uncertainties of style and meaning about them. But the selection on the whole is sound, and cuts out most of the trivia. It includes, for instance, the poet’s forthright account of one of his dreams, which generated a small volume of commentary and elucidation from a Freudian analyst; but a writer who

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could be so casually frank about the sexual particulars of his dreams would have had little need of the psychiatrist's couch. Posthumously, of course, he has been a famous and a favorite specimen for psychoanalytical treatment. A dead man, with such a voluminously morbid record, is the ideal patient for the process. He can even be completely cured, being in no position to continue the course, and quite unable to answer back.

Nor would he have deigned a reply to Sartre's indictment, at one time famous if largely on account of its author's conspicuous prestige at that period, though even then it was seen by some as a somewhat extravagantly erratic outburst. But Sartre was—fashionably—the would-be philosophical and political law-giver of his time, founder of a system of belief with all the unquestionable dogmas of a religion, including a catechism which could infallibly sort out the lost from the saved. Sartre's rhetoric, whether praising or accusing, has for me quite a rich comic flavor. It suggests the gesticulations of one of Daumier's lawyers, arms waving,

gown sleeves flailing as the prosecution rises to its climax and the accusing counsel hovers like a raven over the cowering victim in the dock. In Baudelaire we see before us (according to the infallible existentialist decrees) not only a writer who was a contemptible failure in his chosen work, who was guilty of *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*), and totally deficient in commitment (*engagement*), but a writer (and here we come to the peak of the indictment) who throughout his brief and inglorious career had before his eyes a shining example of those virtues he so signally lacked in himself. Who was this exemplary figure? None other than George Sand!—a lady whom Baudelaire singles out in one of his notebooks and describes as a "latrine," "a stupid ponderous babbler," "an ageing ingénue who cannot quit the boards." This is certainly an equally prejudiced portrait of a famous and successful writer, a wealthy *châtelaine*, and an intermittent political activist whose heart was at one with the workers (except when she came into personal contact with a worker who simply

ignored her orders and roused her to all the fury of an insulted *grande dame*, as she narrates herself in *A Winter In Majorca*). Sartre's lengthy diatribe is simply an act of would-be demolition. As such it is a very nineteenth-century work and portrays the poet as he was conventionally viewed in his own day, which is no doubt why it reverts to an equally dated view of George Sand. It is based on the bourgeois view that financial success in any enterprise, including writing, is a virtue, and that financial failure, of which Baudelaire is a classic exemplar, must be a contemptible vice.

"Baudelaire est au comble de la gloire," exclaims Paul Valéry at the outset of an address on the poet in 1924, nearly sixty years after its subject had ingloriously died of a stroke from the effects of syphilis, overwork, and despair. Retrospectively, most things can be taken for granted, but to understand the past we have to be capable of finding it surprising where it was so. In this sense very few books can have had a more peculiar career than *Les Fleurs du mal*, in its early days at least. At its first appearance it was judged to be not scandalous but simply dirty, obscene, and this was the repute that rubbed off on its author. As he recounts in a letter to Sainte-Beuve dated January 1861, he had heard himself described as "a werewolf . . . in a malicious paper I read a few lines about my repulsive ugliness . . . One day a woman said to me 'It's odd, you are very respectable. I thought you were always drunk and smelled . . .'" This he wrote in the midst of his candidature for the Académie. No wonder he gave it up. The same ill repute may have clung around his name in Belgium and made his lecture tour there such a failure.

Meanwhile readers here and there, in ones and twos, were coming upon the new 1861 edition, expanded and transformed, and finding in it something totally new and yet instantly familiar, a sense of the banality of their own lives and surroundings here transfixed and transfigured, a frisson of recognition unified with a sense of the *strange*. And

one or two of these discoverers were geniuses themselves. Mallarmé recounts how the volume came into his life and transformed his perspective on the craft of poetry, which he had been practicing since childhood. The same thing must have happened to the young Rimbaud when he was barely twelve, with even more decisive results.

Much as he had longed for recognition, and the praise and rewards it would bring, Baudelaire was somewhat taken aback by its first appearance. An admiring article by Verlaine made him feel at once that he did not want to be seen as the founder or leader of some new school of poetry. As a writer he wanted to remain alone. But time was to show, and with gathering speed after his death, that his creative influence would only increase, even across the barriers of language, just as Cézanne's influence and example was to spread throughout European painting. The book has imperfections in plenty, but it still commands a position unmatched by any other volume of poetry of its day, or since, or from long before its day. From being dismissably dirty and shameful, it became the poetry vitally necessary to every European language, even if only by way of translation. Tennyson, with certain unease, labeled it "a poisonous honey brought from France." The land of Shakespeare was too enrapt in its own past achievement to be able to credit anything phenomenal coming in another tongue. And so the influence failed to permeate the English world until the Pound-Eliot partnership introduced it in their own work in a very mitigated form, chiefly based on the verse of Laforgue, who can be fairly described as the Musset of the Symbolist movement. But Laforgue's influence and example proved a vitalizing force in the earlier work of Eliot—and his best. As for Pound, much as he preached the virtues of the example set by recent French poetry in his campaign of "make it new," he curiously avoided almost any mention of Baudelaire, fount and origin of it all. Did he share something of Henry James's *pudeur* with regard to the poet's themes? Eliot's short essay on

Baudelaire is marked by a certain “pilgrim-father” primness with regard to this not very well-behaved subject, whose poetry he finds to be full of echoes of . . . Racine! Well, I suppose if you isolate the two in a void of all other French poetry, they would be seen to employ the same alexandrine, with the same classical rigor. But as for “echoes,” we can only recall that Eliot himself is a poet compact of echoes, and here shows an aptitude for finding them where they are not.

Benjamin's Moscow

Walter Benjamin Moscow Diary.
Translated by Richard Sieburth, edited
by Gary Smith. Harvard University
Press, 160 pages, \$25

reviewed by René Wellek

The periodical *October*—published by the MIT Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts—recently devoted a whole issue, number 35, to printing a translation of Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary*, which dates from December 6, 1926 to the end of January, 1927. Now Harvard University has issued the diary in book form. The manuscript lay in the Adorno archives in Frankfurt for many years and was published in German only in 1980. The delay is explained by the publishers' regard for Asja Lacis, Benjamin's great love for some five years, who died in Russia in 1979, at the age of eighty-eight. It is hard to see why and how she could have objected to its publication and in what way it could have embarrassed or endangered her. She appears in the diary as a committed Communist, and her relation to Benjamin shows at most that she liked gifts and money. Her loyalty to her then companion and lover, the Austrian playwright and director Bernhard Reich, whom she eventually married, is never in doubt. The more plausible explanation for the delay is that the diary was reserved for printing in the sixth volume of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, which contains all his other autobiographical fragments.

Moscow Diary is edited by an American student, Gary Smith, and is substantially enriched by contemporary or near contemporary photographs of Moscow. It also contains a translation of a preface written in 1980 by the late Gershom Scholem, Benjamin's lifelong friend. This great scholar of the cabala, and of the whole history of Jewish mysticism, speaks here of the diary “as an unpleasant and depressing surprise.” He complains that we are left “without insight into or understanding of [the] intellectual dimension of the woman he [Benjamin] loved.” And we hear, Scholem comments, of “hostile, wrenching disputes,” of constant quarrels in the course of a “courtship that remains frustrated almost to the very end of his stay.”

I cannot, however, understand how Scholem can write “almost.” Benjamin was rebuffed throughout his Moscow stay, even though at moments Asja allowed him to kiss and fondle her. Benjamin was actually under the wing of her lover Reich, who showed him around Moscow and introduced him to Russian writers (while deliberately and often slyly preventing any occasion for Benjamin to be alone with Asja). Benjamin was especially dependent on Reich since he knew no Russian and made no attempts to learn the rudiments of the language; his elementary mistakes in Russian names, titles, and terms—apparent in the German edition—were corrected, unnecessarily in my opinion, for this English translation.

Benjamin saw through Asja's attempts to extract small presents and money for a flat in Riga from him; he even recognized her “hardness and lovelessness.” His behavior toward her remains a mystery, explainable only by an abject sexual dependence. On the one hand, Benjamin would tell her bluntly that he hoped to marry her and have a child by her; on the other, he realized that this was an impossibility. We know from other sources that Asja Lacis later came to Berlin in the employment of the Soviet embassy and lived in 1929-30 for two months with Benjamin—until they broke up, quarreling bitterly. Benjamin never saw her again. She

might have been cured of her enthusiasm for the Soviet regime by her banishment to Kazakhstan for fifteen years, from 1939 to 1954.

Benjamin undertook his trip to the Soviet Union spurred by his desire to see Asja, whom he had first met on Capri in 1924. Before leaving, he made a commitment to Martin Buber to write a long piece on Moscow for *Die Kreatur*, and he actually did so. The article—which has been translated into English for Benjamin's *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (1978) edited by Peter Demetz—draws heavily on the diary. Many of the details are the same, and whole passages from the diary about street scenes in Moscow are re-used. The business with Asja is suppressed, of course.

I would argue that the article "Moscow" is stylistically, and as a coherent exposition, greatly superior to the diary. The diary, however, has its own appeal, for its insights into Benjamin's personal relations and immediate reactions to events. Benjamin's hesitations about joining the Communist Party appear in the diary as calculated opportunism. "This would seem to be the right moment now," he writes, "one which would perhaps be dangerous for me to let pass. For precisely because membership in the Party may very well only be an episode for me, it is not advisable to put it off any longer." But he recognizes that "being a Communist in a state where the proletariat rules means completely giving up your private independence." "Only purely external considerations," he writes elsewhere, "hold me back from joining the German Communist Party." The article "Moscow" says in the very first paragraph: "The only guarantee of true insight is to have chosen the stance before one comes to Russia."

Undoubtedly, Benjamin still possessed great powers of observation. He gives a clear description of Russian reality of the time—the want, the shortages, the chaos, the oppression by a pedantic bureaucracy, the new stratification of a society instituting a whole

new caste system. This constitutes the value of the diary. In spite of all his disillusionment over the conditions in Russia, and his personal disappointment at not having found a foothold in Russian literary life, Benjamin still insists that he has made the right choice, that Soviet Russia is a new world and foretells the future of mankind.

Benjamin also had no illusions about the intellectual life of Russia. His contacts were disappointing. He was present, for instance, at the great debate about Meyerhold's avant-garde stage adaptation of Gogol's *The Inspector General*, where he heard Mayakovsky, Andrei Bely, and other literary celebrities speak without understanding them. Still, Benjamin acquired a considerable knowledge of the situation and factions in Soviet literary life, which he later used in a paper called "Die politische Gruppierung der russischen Schriftsteller" ("The Political Grouping of Russian Writers"), dated March 11, 1927. He met a few Russian writers, including Grigori Lelevich, the editor of the magazine *Na postu* (*On Guard*), who was then on the eve of his banishment (he actually perished in a camp in 1945). Benjamin saw a little of the troubles of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia. He had hoped they would accept his article on Goethe, but it was summarily rejected. Benjamin clearly had a very low opinion of the level of Soviet scholarship at that time. At one point he heard a novelist and official of the Writers' Union, Yuri Lebedinsky, maintain heatedly that Shakespeare lived before the invention of the printing press.

During his stay in Moscow, Benjamin acquired some knowledge of Russian films and filmmaking, later summarized in an article, "Zur Lage der russischen Filmkunst" ("On the Situation of Russian Film Art," March 11, 1927), and saw what then could be seen of architecture and painting in Moscow. He was deeply impressed by St. Basil's Cathedral, but thought Lenin's Mausoleum totally botched. He admired the French paintings in the galleries, but felt that better works could be seen elsewhere. He did not like Russian modernist painting:

Larionov and Goncharova produced, he thought, worthless stuff, derivative of contemporary German and French paintings. Actually, he was most attracted by Russian toys. In the Toy Museum, he bought what he found worth buying, and later wrote a short article on the subject with some photographs, which appeared in a German radio journal. (This article is appended to the diary in this edition, together with five photographs.)

Moscow Diary was worth translating for many reasons, not least its insight into Benjamin's personality and for its vivid portrait of Moscow in the winter of 1925-26 at the height of the NEP period. The translation by Richard Sieburth is accurate and fluent. I notice, however, one passage where the meaning is obscured by a misadventure with the printer. Benjamin refers to a novella about the "Frunze case, which supposedly was carried out against his wishes and on Stalin's orders." The original speaks rather about a story which concerns the Frunze case, "who reportedly was operated on against his will at the command of Stalin" (and died of it).

The "monster" myth

Stanley Burnshaw Robert Frost Himself. George Braziller, 305 pages, \$19.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

In *Robert Frost Himself*—part memoir, part biography, part polemic—Stanley Burnshaw fulfills a request made of him by the eminent poet twenty-seven years ago. In June of 1959 the eighty-five-year-old Frost had asked his old friend, then an editor at Frost's publisher Holt, to "save" him, as the poet put it, from "Larry"—i.e., Lawrance Thompson, Frost's official biographer. At the time, Thompson had already been at work on the project for twenty years. (According to Frost's wishes, it wasn't to be published in his lifetime.) As Burnshaw—now eighty

years old himself, with a distinguished career as a poet, critic, and editor behind him—relates the fateful conversation:

After his long silence, he raised his head and gazed in my eyes. "I'm counting on you to protect me from Larry."

I lurched at him in amazement. He nodded steadily. "But he's your official biographer! *You* picked him."

"I'm *counting* on you," he repeated gravely. "You will be here. I won't."

"If you need protection, simply undo what you did."

"Too late now."

"*Anyone* has the right to retract for a valid reason."

"I gave him my word."

"You gave him your word how many years ago? Twenty? You gave yourself up to a person you thought you could trust. How could you *know* he would change? He *must* have changed or you wouldn't be asking for protection."

"I want the truth. I need protection from lies, all sorts of lies."

As it turned out, Frost's fears were well founded. Thompson's three massive volumes, which appeared in 1966, 1970, and 1976 (the last written by Thompson's research assistant, R. H. Winnick, after the biographer's death in 1973), were a harsh indictment of the poet. "Nowhere," notes Burnshaw, "in the annals of literature has so marked a change of the public heart been recorded." The critics, with few exceptions, were taken in by Thompson's performance. When the second volume of what one writer would later call Thompson's "work of riddance" was published, Helen Vendler, in a review in the *New York Times Book Review*, called Frost a "monster of egotism" who left "behind him a wake of destroyed human lives." Following Thompson's lead, she accused Frost of "criminal blandness" in his dealings with his son Carol, who had killed himself with a shotgun at the age of thirty-eight in 1940. *The Years of Triumph*, as the second volume was ironically titled, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1971. When the third volume came

out—which the biographer had hoped to call *The Years of Glory* but which was changed to *The Final Years* after his death—one reviewer, David Bromwich, insisted that “a more hateful human being cannot have lived,” while Howard Moss declared that Frost was a “mean-spirited megalomaniac” who represented “one of the worst examples of a common strain in American literary life.”

It is difficult to convey the enormity of Thompson’s two-thousand-page assault. But for a quick fix on the scope of Thompson’s ambition the reader need only consult the famous index to the second volume. Under “Frost, Robert Lee,” Thompson had listed sixty-three topical subheadings. Among these are “Anti-Intellectual,” “Baffler-Teaser-Deceiver,” “Brute,” “Campaigner,” “Charlatan,” “Cowardice,” “Enemies,” “Escapist,” “Hate,” “Insanity,” “Jealousy,” “Murderer,” “Pretender,” “Punishment,” “Rage,” “Retaliations, Poetic,” “Revenge,” “Self-Centeredness,” “Spoiled Child,” and “Vindictive.” Scarcely a single human virtue can be found. What’s more, Thompson’s list of negative characteristics and qualities could have easily been expanded. For example, there could have been a subheading “Cheater,” for Frost’s having been guilty of, as Thompson puts it, “gouging a worshiper” on a real-estate deal, or “Manipulator,” for his having “cultivated” an impressive array of critics, college presidents, and book-club editors, or “Self-Absorption,” for, in Thompson’s words, the poet’s “thoughts of suicide [which] became another lifelong game of self-indulgent pity,” or, of course, “Cruelty,” for his being, according to Thompson, totally responsible for the unhappiness of his family.

The man Frost called upon for help in his moment of desperation might have seemed, on the surface, deeply unsuited to the task. When Burnshaw first met Frost on a visit to the Gully Farm in 1929 (arranged through a mutual friend, the poet Wade Van Dore), the younger man was already politically left-wing. Yet Frost, at the time the supposed epitome of Yankee individuality, found

much to like in Burnshaw, and vice versa. During their first encounter Frost was “friendliness flowing steady.” The truth was, Frost relished diversity. No doubt he also admired Burnshaw’s taste for what the latter calls “private” poetry during such socially aware times. (One of Burnshaw’s private poems had been taken by Marianne Moore for *The Dial* around this time.) Much of the second chapter, entitled “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” details Burnshaw’s various attempts to defend his poetic taste while working as an editor at the Communist Party weekly *The New Masses*. According to his account of those years, he bravely challenged Joseph North—an editor of *The New Masses*—about the quality of the proletarian fiction and poetry he was printing. On one occasion he foisted a copy of Frost’s poem “Provide, Provide” on North. “We talk of ‘the system,’” Burnshaw said. “There it stands in twenty-one bitter lines, and very much more.” We are given a sense of what Burnshaw (and Frost) were up against from Granville Hicks’s review of Frost’s *Collected Poems* in *The New Republic* of December 3, 1930. Hicks had written that there was “one thing” Frost

cannot do: he cannot contribute directly to the unification, in imaginative terms, of our culture. He cannot give us the sense of belonging in the industrial, scientific, Freudian world in which we find ourselves.

Burnshaw’s retort to Hicks’s alarmingly narrow view, fifty-six years later, is worth quoting at length:

For purposes of narrative verse [Frost] can find not merely pathos but also, because there are certain standards implicit in that world, something close to tragedy. He can find subjects for comedy there, dramatic conflicts, objects of natural beauty. He can treat abnormality and yet keep it in its place, or he can find a theme for as illuminating a commentary on failure as Robinson ever wrote. In the contemplation of nature he can, as scores of lyrics show, find the beginnings of paths that lead straight to the problems that have perennially

perplexed the mind of man. He can, in short, find opportunity and stimulus to exercise to the full the poetic imagination.

It is precisely this kind of sensitivity to Frost's poetry, in the end, that makes *Robert Frost Himself* such an illuminating book. To be sure, Burnshaw has amassed a considerable amount of evidence to refute Thompson's "official" life. He demonstrates, for example, that Thompson seriously undervalued the importance of Frost's friendship with Wade Van Dore; that Thompson's personal dislike of Frost was greater than we imagined; that the poet's politics were not of the cartoonish reactionary sort; that Frost was capable of great devotion as a friend, husband, and parent; and so on. But it is Burnshaw's capacity to appreciate and understand the poetry that makes his book so persuasive. It is the kind of understanding that is nowhere to be found in Thompson's book, nor—as Burnshaw reveals—in the over one thousand pages of notes for the biography on file in a University of Virginia archive. It "is helpful, if shocking," says Burnshaw, "to realize [that] Frost's poems as poems are virtually ignored" in these notes. All of which would seem to confirm Richard Poirier's remark that Thompson "did not know how to read [the poems]."

How necessary is it to "know how to read" a poem in order to write or comprehend a poet's life? In Frost's case, as with any major writer, it is quite important. For if we read the poems literally, and conceive Frost to be primarily a poet of maxims and country wisdom, it is likely that we will see the man in equally simplistic terms—that is, as someone who is the sum of certain (selected) outward actions. If, on the other hand, we perceive the poetry as essentially ambiguous, as something that makes consistent use of strategies which question or supersede the poem's literal content (as recent critics have seen it), we will in all likelihood view the man as not simply the sum of his actions but as the sum of his actions *and* his art. Now clearly Thompson sees the poetry the

first way. Literal-minded to a fault, he grants Frost no subtlety or complexity of thought. And Burnshaw sees it—along with Richard Poirier and William Pritchard, both of whom have published helpful books on Frost¹—in the second way. The Frost Burnshaw had in mind when he wrote this book is the author of highly complex poems and of the statements, "Life has lost none of its mystery and its romance. The more we know of it, the less we know," and, "There will always be something left to know, something left to excite the imagination." It's heartening to find Burnshaw following Frost's lead in this, punctuating his narrative with comments such as "Yet what did I *really* know [about Frost's motivations]?" "Did a 'final' idea [in Frost's poetry] exist?" and "No poet alive could be more elusive."

Appropriately, Burnshaw devotes a considerable amount of space in *Robert Frost Himself* to Lionel Trilling's speech at the dinner in honor of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday. As Burnshaw suggests, Trilling's talk was the turning point in our understanding of Frost's poetry.² "I have to say that *my* Frost," said Trilling,

is not the Frost I seem to perceive existing in the minds of so many of his admirers He is not the Frost who controverts the bitter modern astonishment at the nature of human life: the opposite is so. He is not the Frost who reassures us by his affirmations of old virtues, simplicities, pieties, and ways of feeling: anything but. [At the same time] I believe that he is quite as American as everyone thinks he is, but not in the way that everyone thinks he is

I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet.

1 Poirier's book, *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, was published by Oxford University Press in 1977, and Pritchard's *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* was published by the same firm in 1984.

2 Although Randall Jarrell had taken a similar critical tack in an article on Frost a few years earlier, his views, as Burnshaw says, "hadn't shifted the critical stream."

Trilling's words caused an uproar. According to Burnshaw, "Donald Adams kept shaking his head in fury" after the speech. The next day Adams advised Trilling in *The New York Times* to "come out of the Freudian wood . . . and face the facts of life." Frost himself was visibly upset—or so it seemed. Burnshaw's most interesting revelation regarding the event, however, was Thompson's rushing away from the room at the Waldorf-Astoria immediately following the speech. (He would later write in his biography that the "'terrifying' debate was a local storm not destined to survive.") Burnshaw asked Frost afterwards, "How could

[Thompson] let himself stay away after what happened?" Perhaps what Thompson was running away from was the realization that he had erred greatly in his estimation and perception of Frost's poetry, and that his life's work was deeply and irrevocably scarred as a result of it.

Stanley Burnshaw has carried out his pledge to his friend well, but not at the expense of objectivity. *Robert Frost Himself* places in perspective a poetic career that was not "a triumph over his enemies," as Thompson characterized it, but, as Lionel Trilling said, one that generated "the terrible actualities of life in a new way" for us.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of Frederick Crews's new book, *Skeptical Engagements* (Oxford University Press, \$19.95). Two of the essays in this book, "The Freudian Way of Knowledge" and "Pop Goes the Critic," were published in earlier issues of *The New Criterion*.

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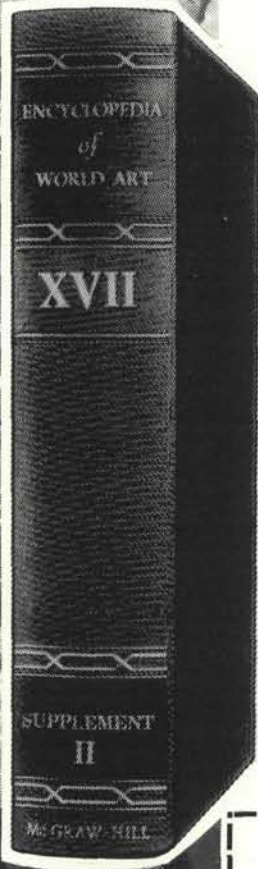
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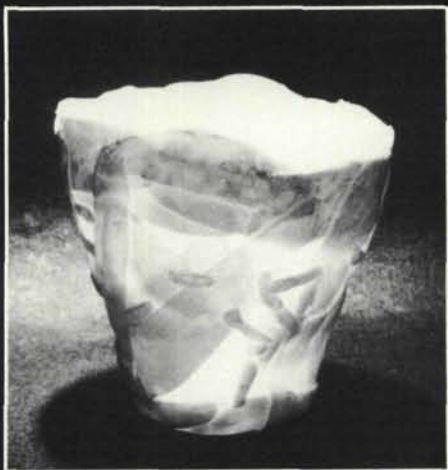
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RUDOLF STAFFEL

THE HELEN DRUTT GALLERY HONORS RUDOLF STAFFEL
ON THE OCCASION OF HIS 75th BIRTHDAY, JUNE 15, 1986.



FOR RUDI: A FEW NOTES

Most things don't have a voice. But there is great power in silent things — painting, sculpture, cups and bowls — eloquence also can occur in silence. Rudi's silence as a man — a receptive, considerate use of few words — informs his porcelain work. Light punctuates the walls of his vessels just as degrees of silence influence whatever we say — sometimes completely for a moment between words, sometimes less so in the modesty of a preposition, sometimes in the audible grain of a word as it bursts open, swells, grates and trails away into silence again. Use and beauty fuse in his works: light enters not only from the top but from any unpredictable point, and yet they hold liquid, or simply glow. A Staffel embodies the same passion and formal clarity as Oriental calligraphy — wild shapes and intricate textures, splashes like stains on old walls, tree trunks, sky — it emerges from the dark of possibility bearing the noble tatters of a thing made articulate because it has had to pass through this artist's brave, lyrical ignorance. There is no known path that the work can take. It is as if Rudi were a blind man shaping things he hopes will express that blindness. When you see what he has made, its elegance, tenderness, and luminous generosity immediately touch you. The things that come from his hands are irresistible reminders of our vulnerability, our inability to explain ourselves fully and be known, our need to touch and be touched. You have stood and talked with someone and, not conscious of the look on *your* face, suddenly seen it cross the other person's face — a piercing, warm, full split-second of permanent truth. For both of you. Then a silence.

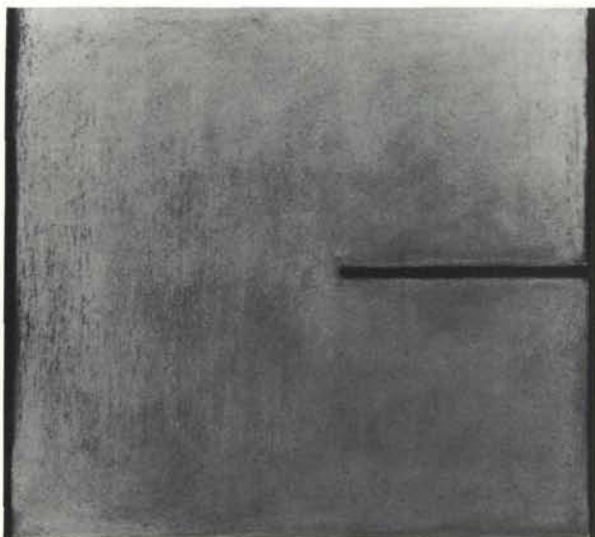
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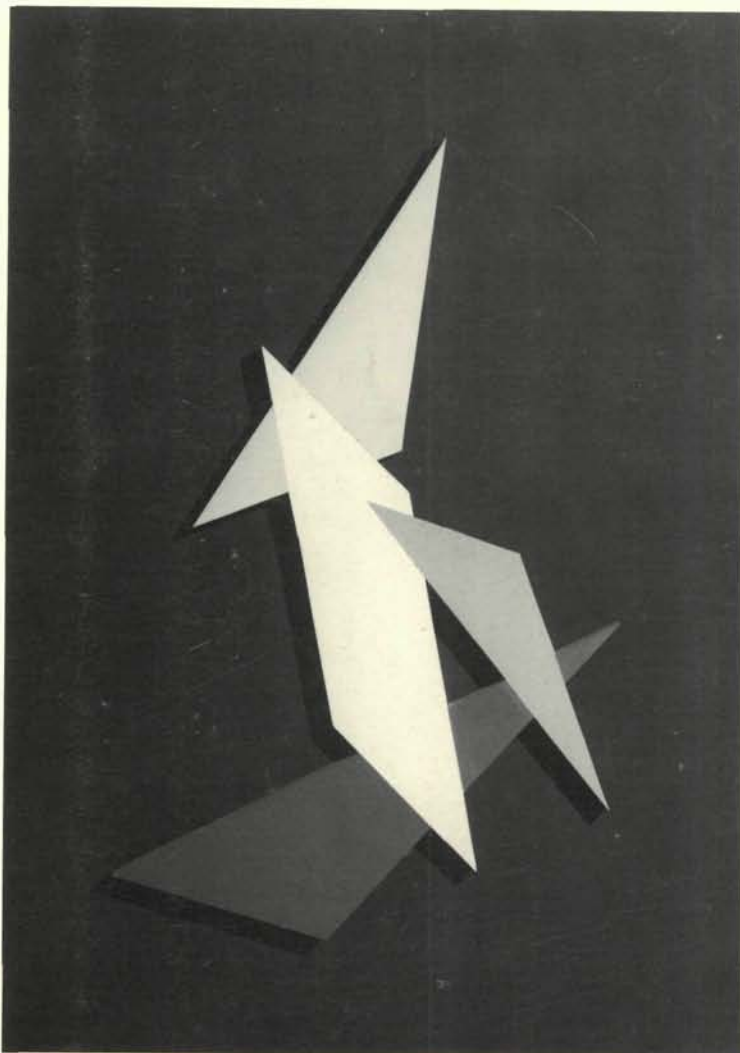


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